

Albumen

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Iron bars cross the window at regular vertical intervals. Someone has decided to keep me out, has spent a great deal of time fabricating this mediocre defense. The moon stands on the far side of the world and doesn't seem overly anxious to make its journey skyward, illustrating without of course meaning to a concept I have held dear since the day I tumbled from whatever womb housed me originally. Don't confuse my volubility, though, with a desire to reveal secrets that might promise to alter the course of history much the way monsoons have the habit of altering the course of rivers. Which is to say only occasionally, and with terrible consequences for those who inhabit the banks. Remember when the desire to make love was the primary driving force of society, and the more we inhibited it the taller the buildings became? I used to stand for hours at a time waiting to see if anything was going to change, if my daemon was going to show up like the one that belonged to Socrates used to, with wisdom and puns not altogether comprehensible to those he later shared them with. Sometimes women do me favors that I can't immediately return because of my odd physiology, but when the time comes I can, you can bet your hard-won fortune that I will stop hiding behind the pin oak trees that line the far end of the property and start speaking in tongues. Which is the same thing as speaking in regular syllables and signifiers, I suppose, except the sound of it has been altered slightly by the advent of some mystery we can't quite get our minds around because our minds aren't that pliable. After a minute or two, I try again, hammering at the shutters with my fists, but the vibrations run both ways and the night becomes synonymous with pain even though I imagined beforehand the

passing of violets from one hand to another, the whispering of obscene truths too literal to stand the scrutiny promised by uttering them at ordinary volume.



Our gifts arrive as if from above, finding us through old fashioned detective work, I suppose, or the unerring instincts of the passenger pigeon. The sound grates on the ear, turns it into an unwilling participant in a process that suddenly bespeaks agony and the importance of internalizing agony so as to make it part of the self. But only that part other people have difficulty recognizing. I remember days when the neighborhood grass brought the eggshell equivalent of hives to my body and nobody believed me when I explained what had happened. They looked at me like I had intentionally done something harmful to myself, had wished to move from this world to the next one in underhand fashion. But I didn't believe in the next world and I still don't. How do we unhook the upper portions, separate them from those that touch the ground, and still have enough left over for the spring clearance, for the throngs of people marching in this direction from the train stations and the ramps on the river? If you swallow a handful of the yellow pills, they will counteract anything unpleasant caused by the red ones. But a note of caution: recognize ahead of time that the hallucinations aren't always centered in your mind. The lynx that bound about on the rocks outside will, if you let them, tear your pillows to shreds and the members of the symphony sawing away in the background must, at some point, get paid. Otherwise, who's going to score your experiences, who's going to turn an ordinary stroll down the sidewalk into an epic adventure of the mind? Maybe it's time we start to file away each discreet episode from the past that still resides with us in its own mislabeled space. That way we have little chance of pulling it out again on command and must trust to accident, to happenstance. Like that which permits us to enter a room we've never entered before and find

there a piece of jewelry, a garnet ring, say, that went missing years before when we were fishing on the Gulf or when we were shaking hands with someone who would subsequently be engaged in condemning every house on the block simply because he possessed the foresight to gather all the paperwork necessary, hadn't left so much as a codicil to fend for itself in the dark labyrinths of the library, or the alleyways on either side of the library where the wind takes our words -- spoken or otherwise, arising in anger or in guilt -- and mixes them in unceremoniously with the rubbish, with the paper bags and the rotting husks of unidentifiable fruit, with the brown fragments of broken glass.



After an interminable wait, another wait of lesser duration. And then someone comes to the door. I suspect our rantings are of interest only to our own subconscious minds. And that only when the cosmos has aligned itself properly. It lines up the far galaxies according to a pattern it's impossible to unravel if you haven't been paying attention to the things you say in your sleep. This requires, of course, assistance from someone who shares your bed and is willing to lay awake nights with a notepad in her hand. An old man only about three and a half feet tall emerges and says he has been waiting for me ever since his own dreams began to fill up with visions of soufflés, with women who paid him the most exquisite attention because, they said, his name had come up in a drawing they held at the Eagles club down the road where people are forever going to escape the misery of their domestic situations, the radios tuned to stations they abhor, the shoelaces used to tie other shoelaces together in ever-bulkier conglomerations. I smell stewed rabbit coming from somewhere on the premises and make to push past the old man and into the house that seems now as if it has been sitting in this spot for over a thousand years, even though I know it is of more recent vintage if only because the whole country is still an infant in comparison with others even on the same continent. Maybe it's time we admit the flesh is susceptible to infection and attempt to rework it, to change its composition by adding elements not usually associated with the body and its component parts – the thick red clay that piles up on either side of the river, the plastics mixed and extruded in the plants that line that river like

juvenile swans. Certainly the results would be disappointing but then when have we ever examined those things we've made with our hands and our minds without some sense of having failed colossally? Of having brought shame on ourselves like that associated with masturbating in public? Or refusing when we have been encouraged to do so? A moment of disassociation, of what might even have been unconsciousness if by unconsciousness you mean the opposite of consciousness. Afterward, the patina shell of my forehead aches -- but has not, I hope, cracked again -- from a blow the old midget has apparently delivered with a pool cue he holds in his hand, one I hadn't noticed previously due to the unusually poor lighting in that part of the world after the sun has set. The moon, on the other hand, is not up to the task assigned it because the moon seems to think it only has to hang in the branches of certain species of tree and may ignore the others much the way we ignore those who pretend to know us after they have read our names on a nametag or (less frequently) a plaque.



The evening is no longer brisk. It gives off the scent of alder and cinnamon almost gratuitously. In fact, we have trouble forgiving it for its kindness. Outside the windows the world seems daubed in places with very dark paint, arranged in such a way as to lull us into a sense of well-being at precisely the same time the microbes are amassing along our borders, are sending out chemical feelers and communicating with one another through a system of images of the sort that can't actually be seen. What happens when we interrupt our thoughts with thoughts that belong to other organisms? That barely meet the minimum criteria necessary to be considered thoughts in the first place? Are we in danger of losing our way, of becoming something less than ourselves? Or perhaps something superior? Like those statues composed of iron that stand in a ring in the park on the outskirts of town and which look like ordinary businessmen with briefcases and bow ties, but which on closer inspection turn out to be the spitting image of anyone who gazes at them for more than five minutes, mirrors, if you will, that forego glass in favor of some psychic disturbance initiated through clever use of materials (like, I suppose, varnish) and the ever-shifting angles of the sunlight as it makes its way over and through the tops of the trees and hits the surface of the statues and bounces off, of course, and continues its journey into the retina where, if I'm not mistaken, it is swallowed up forever and disappears. How dreadful to imagine ourselves the end point and agent of annihilation for that which enables life! That which enables vision! I prefer to stand at the sidelines and formulate theories that justify my own particular manner of existence and that denigrate all those who don't happen to share that manner of existence – who seem to genuinely enjoy the company of other people, say, even

inviting them to their house for dinner on occasion and listening with rapt attention to the adventures they relate concerning where they have been recently and what they found there – silver ingots hidden in the cold waters of a Guatemalan stream; folk art canvases hung in abandoned warehouses in Berlin. And though the surroundings might be exotic, the depictions on the canvases are, for the most part, typical for the genre: two dimensional human beings wearing outsized hats and playing stringed instruments on a hillside otherwise populated with bearded goats and banners declaring the coming apocalypse. Each letter has been rendered in a different color in an attempt, I suspect, to command the attention of the eye, an attempt to make the message more palatable to those who might be tempted to turn away from the canvas through tedium or an innate lack of interest in the future brought on by any number of factors, but most prominently a diet poor in beta carotenes.



Electric pulses range up and down my leg, reminding me for a moment of the substance coursing unseen through the walls, but just as suddenly there is a cessation of all energy and I black out. In my dreams miniature statuettes surround me and I have the feeling that some of them are attempting to communicate, to utter some final devastating statement through a medium other than speech. We have a name for the re-arrangement of the senses accompanying love in its initial stages, but we rarely use it because to do so puts us at risk of being labeled a romantic, or an ordinary dipsomaniac with romantic tendencies who is nevertheless afraid of the moon. Eventually one of the statuettes (representing, I believe, a local deity long since abandoned or discredited) claims he can alter his pulse simply by willing it to happen, can slow it down and speed it up on command but when I express skepticism he will not hold his wrist out for me to examine. He says he doesn't believe there are any other people on the planet in my situation, meaning, of course, someone seemingly composed of cracked and subsequently fused eggshell, round as a tear drop and sporting human limbs. Doesn't believe, in fact, that I exist, or at least not in the form he experiences, and so he all but accuses me of being an hallucination. Which is, I suppose, when you think about it, kind of flattering. We aren't permitted to determine for ourselves the order of appearance of those things that happen, that come out of the blue and change our circumstances one way or another. But we are permitted to list them in the logbooks we keep in our jacket pockets, and then erase them again, or cut them out, assigning each event its own slender strip of paper, which we can then paste

back into the book in an entirely different order. Or simply let blow away on the breeze, the benefit of doing so obvious to anyone who has been walking along the road where the cliffs drop precipitously a mere foot or two away from where the asphalt ends. Of course, for those of us living far away from cliffs of any sort, no benefit is necessary. We simply go about our business with the understanding that our feet are going to wind up on solid ground no matter what we do. And when we fall anyway, when we find ourselves tumbling and spiraling in space, reaching out desperately for any purchase whatsoever in the abyss that suddenly surrounds us on all sides like oxygen, we think perhaps the sensation has been foisted on us by someone with a stake in the outcome and the means of creating entirely new worlds out of the old one the way we turn our own worn clothing into puppets to entertain the children, or filters through which to strain liquids should we find it necessary to separate those liquids from the materials suspended within them.



Under the façade or what appears to be a façade when viewed at a certain angle, you find a second façade less extensive and less ornate. Patterned after Muslim arches and containing pictorial depictions of battles that never took place, at least in this hemisphere, it hums a little when the wind picks up which almost always happens in early November and continues for two straight months sometimes uninterrupted, the cornflowers close by bent double with the force and habit of it. When I lost my way, I pleaded with the gods to reveal themselves in the form of other more recognizable gods of the sort that had made their appearance previously in sacred texts the translation of which I always imagined myself undertaking just as soon as I found the time. But suppose this is all the time we will ever be allotted – that which we are currently immersed in like sulfur water at the hot springs. Will that mean we have no hope of accomplishing anything of value in spite of our making enormous efforts to re-route traffic or dispose once and for all of some leading theory in astronomy? Does that mean our dimensions have always been and will always be similar to those of the person who stares back at us when we happen to stop by the edge of a pond and look down into the water there, which is shallow and does a poor job of concealing the creatures that pass by underneath? My longing comes and goes much like these animals. It makes its appearance and demands a hearing, all but scratches at the signposts that announce distances to cities in the region, these cities boasting names, like Vincennes, with their roots planted firmly in the past as if whoever lives there is afraid we will not take it seriously, that we will relegate it to the place where cartoons are set and where inanimate objects are therefore blessed with the power of speech. Pretty soon, though,

my longing disappears again, runs up into the mountains where the snow is starting to accumulate even though it's still autumn on the plain and the bison are fattening up on what's left of the grasses.



The explosives occupy a corner of the room, wrapped in tarps and stinking like something that has just dragged itself in from the swamp or slaughterhouse. I always before imagined the materials of annihilation as somehow pristine around the edges, clean as the piece of paper on which we write our arithmetic problems when we are younger, clean as the liquid one uses to rinse the gore away from a wound that is not too serious now but which promises to get nasty if left to its own devices. I find a mirror in another room and examine my forehead, but whatever is there is no more frightful than what was there before, lines and cracks and strange wavy ravines in the shell -- all of it taped up after the fall or, in some instances, stapled. The logistics of this, the sheer impossibility of stapling a substance as brittle as egg shell, combined at once with the incontestable fact of it (the seeing it with one's own eyes), still keeps me up nights and causes a queasiness not unlike that which descends when one has smashed a finger with a hammer or witnessed someone leap from a tall edifice. I try to think of almost anything else when confronted with the sight of these metal dashes in the place where my body meets what is not my body and therefore all of creation minus this one thing that is me -- past sojourns on the Riviera, or at least imagined sojourns now taking on tangibility through repetition and a long-term addiction to painkillers, lately replaced with a short-term infatuation with a woman possessing wax bean skin and eyes like beads of mercury escaped from whatever container was robust enough, at least initially, to contain them. The heart has this habit of intruding itself into the more elevated parts of the body, the airy heights, and insisting on explanations and rationalizations for things we

ordinarily wouldn't consider worthy of any form of cognition at all. Like why the body is never entirely comfortable with itself. Why the hands are forever seeking out portions of other people's bodies to rest on or explore or torment. Maybe this is due to the intentions of some hypothetical -- but still formidable for all that -- ethereal Grand Poo-Bah, some cosmic architect with a capital A (and C), ensconced in his overarching dome and penciling in changes by the second. As the whim hits him or necessity dictates because nothing stands still even for a minute once he has let the process escape his control. Once he has turned it loose upon the wind and the gently rolling terrain of that theme park where he was most recently disposed of, made to seem irrelevant, through rational argument or vicodin-induced hallucinations.



What you learned from the previous owner you tried to conceal, tried to cover in an aural camouflage lately centered in the folktales of the Pyrenees. In the budgetary debates that turn our everyday lives into charts and figures we have a hard time recognizing as having anything to do with us. We might make replicas and attempt to stand on them for an hour or two, but as soon as it starts raining, the cardboard frays and disintegrates, and our anxiety reaches such levels as has never been documented before. It morphs into something possessed of actual teeth and a strange hair / polyester blend that remains in our nightmares for weeks afterward. Settles there like refugees and makes ten o'clock an hour we dread because we have to put the kids to bed (assuming we have kids) and we know that soon afterward the whole history of the earth will start again and reach the present after meandering about in the pockets and crannies no one documented the first time through. I tried to steer this entity away from Eulalie, tried to save her from the embarrassment of having to halt its momentum with her bare hands, but failure in my endeavors stalks me from morning until mid-afternoon when Eulalie herself can be seen traipsing through the forests in search of whatever it is she has decided is missing from her life. We can't even begin to conceptualize this because our conceptual apparatus is so similar to hers it would be like the mind trying to map itself from without. Like a civil war re-enactor trying to position himself on the wrong side of the battle so as to view his own

destruction, or pretend destruction as the case may be. It just causes a temporary disorientation and leads eventually (if not rectified) to a kind of guilt like that which shadows us all the way to the workplace and nourishes itself on the impure thoughts that bubble to the surface there on average about once every twenty-three seconds. And sure, these thoughts are obstructed, they back up behind obstacles placed in their way purposefully, but they can never be entirely defeated, managing instead to take advantage of structural weaknesses in the obstacle itself or the terrain on which it has been placed where they drive in a wedge; they create space for the inevitable inundation. They push through and fan out on the other side and sweep everything away before them, leaving behind a devastated landscape very similar in appearance, I would assume, to the cratered plains of the moon. Or portions of an island after a volcanic eruption but before the return of the first shoots of vegetation – breadfruit and fig trees and weeds of every tropical variety -- the seeds for which were perhaps transported on the wind from the other islands in the vicinity that have not yet decided to destroy themselves through whatever mechanism causes these things to happen, up to and including perhaps what we would call ordinary boredom.



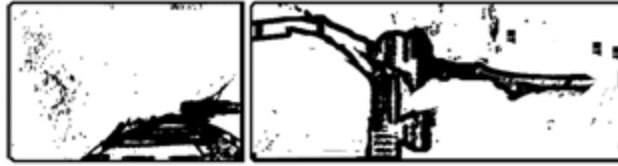
Dawn becomes the rumor that has passed through this township one too many times. No one believes any more the things being said because to believe anything seems to open one up to the possibility of having to believe everything. Even the stories about people living under trees, or transforming themselves somehow into animals with the help of the trees, or just stumbling from one tree to another looking for a sign that they are not wasting their time, that they are, in fact, in store for an eventful couple of years. Turns out the old midget's name is Sunday, which goes with his sideburns but not so much his diminutive stature, though it's possible he has given me a nom de plume in anticipation of the manifesto he intends some day to write. As near as I can make out, his beef is with the residents of the town whose lights are just visible through the swaying of the branches of the trees outside, or at least what I take to be branches because the laws of optics require there exist something solid between the subject and the object if the object comes in and out of view at regular intervals. That something must of necessity be in movement itself if the object is not in movement. We know light is in constant flux but we also attribute a static quality to it if we imagine the light originating from something as stationary as a year-round habitation. We can expect to be placed under some sort of microscope if our thoughts leak out from their normal hiding places and wind up advertising themselves to all and sundry like cut-rate jewelers. Or are we simply inventing the microscope because we don't like the idea of a world where microorganisms can operate unseen? I know what it feels like when they run amok in the soft pockets of flesh surrounding your jaw, but as soon as I try to launch into this description, Sunday raises his odd knotty paw in the air and brings a hush to the room that even the stale air

obeys, as if it has been waiting for years to demonstrate its allegiance to this man and his peculiar ideas concerning retribution, concerning parenthood and the sorting of indigenous plants into categories suggested not by the standard rules of taxonomy but by the imaginations of those who have little else to occupy them, who can't even manage a remark in defense of their deepest beliefs when they are finally made aware that they harbor such beliefs. That they aren't just wandering from place to place in haphazard fashion and at the mercy of that vacuum which passes, in some circles at least, for a soul.



Let the blank places represent the intervals of time and distance between one well-known city and another. Then scrap that and let them represent themselves until the impulse collapses under its own considerable weight. Until it leads us by the nose to the center stairwell and indicates we should jump. No one is sure, really, how this is accomplished but we open the floor up to suggestions and the silence is overwhelming. It begins to weigh on us like some odd and oddly beautiful collection of paving stones. If you were to open your veins in your arms one at a time under close medical supervision, or just on your own come two Tuesdays from now, and then play around in there with something that looks like a pipe cleaner, you still wouldn't be able to convince me your psychosis has returned. I know the evidence seems fairly substantial from where everyone else sits – which is close by the pond where the turtles over-winter in the mud at the bottom without ever, apparently, requiring any oxygen – but I refuse to weigh the evidence equally with the emotion. I refuse to let logic descend from its perch hard by the heavens, because as soon as it does, people are bartering all around you for not just the essentials, but luxuries. And luxuries of a sort we couldn't have pictured even three or four generations ago. Fresh asparagus. Socks with no holes in them. An infant carriage you are, I gather, supposed to wheel an infant around in when you decide it's time to go outside for some fresh air rather than just sitting inside all day working Sudoku puzzles. We turn to tinder at the core, at the very center, and then we look around for a flame that doesn't show any indication of being struck. Instead everyday desires and something that looks a lot like what we called "wishes" when we were younger (we didn't have any better term for it, and, arguably, still don't) pile up in the corner

usually reserved for an impromptu mental pantry. When we decide we will sort and separate them and deliver them to their various destinations using wheelbarrows if we must, those closest to us in stature (if not heart, because the heart is something that does not replicate – it starts fresh each time, like a villanelle) can't imagine what we have been up to all these years. They can't believe the lines at the corners of our eyes just appeared there one day, almost at random, when there was nothing particularly stressful happening. No end-of-the-year reports to file, no jealousy disturbing the air with its lime-like scent and its nearly limitless reverberations.



Bland tones drift in from all directions, creating an atmosphere just like the atmosphere would be, I imagine, if there were no tones, no sounds of any kind other than those made naturally by the occupants of this particular part of the forest, animals mostly, but not exclusively. The main idea, says Sunday the midget, is the proper admixture of light and dark, tall and short, seasons when the mists come in off the oceans and those when you forget in which direction the oceans lie. I would like to lay the blame on those who forget this fundamental rule or who pervert it intentionally, hoping to grab some notoriety for themselves before they slink off into their graves. Or their clubhouses constructed of plywood and hoisted high up into the branches of an elm tree. I remember, he says, counting the seconds between one thought and the next, or trying to, mapping everything out by increments and intuition, until it became readily apparent that I wasn't actually capturing individual thoughts, but the idea of individual thoughts, the marker, so to speak, thrown off by the movement of those individual thoughts through time and space, just as if the marker were some sort of electronic impulse or chemical reaction similar to those caused when large-bodied animals swim through a cluster of smaller-bodied animals in the sea and leave in their wake a phosphorescent flash, which is in all likelihood a primitive alarm system unleashed by those smaller organisms, but seems to our eyes a performance for our benefit. A complex array of lights and patterns unleashed to entertain us when we are safely above the waves in a vessel chartered for the evening, or to frighten us half to death when we are up to our necks and treading water in those same waves, the night sky stretching away into the distance and the only sound for miles around being that of the water knocking up against itself as it travels in several

different directions at the same time. Who knows how we got there; who knows how we got anywhere to this point? Perhaps it's best to just assume the circumstances weren't pleasant but they weren't unmanageable either. They were a lot like those birds that talk when you put them into cages. They have the potential to say the most hurtful things, to try to make you feel guilty. And you do feel guilty because the birds are in cages and not perched in the branches of the tropical fig trees that ought, by rights, to house them. But they don't say what you fear the most. They don't unleash a torrent of invective of the sort you actually deserve. They spend their time, rather, uttering phrases they've heard before. Simple things, with puns at the center.



Just how desirable is it anyway to be self-contained? To wander the forest with little more than the clothes on your back and the memories fighting for space in your skull which is thin as paper as far as the cosmos is concerned and easily breached. What happens to those memories when they find their way outside the container, when they are let loose upon the atmosphere by an accident or an intentional dispatching of the soul of whose substance they form a significant part? Do they continue to exist in some version we no longer recognize, hobbling about like helium balloons with rocks tied to their strings? Or do they disintegrate with the rest, simply cease to be because they were never very real anyway? They held the same relation to actual substance that we hold to Plato's Ideas – simple passing representations disappointing in their flawed nature and their tendency to behave in ways that don't suit their position, that embarrass those who wish for the world and everything in it to add up. To find the termination of its column. You can't imagine the precautions a man who is an egg must take to make sure the rest of the world doesn't discover his secret! The multiple layers of cotton, the shying away from edges of any kind. Once, a woman very like Eulalie in appearance, but without the incandescent words in her mouth -- without the touch that sends knife blades into the body and the body welcomes it, the body calls out in ecstasy in bypass of the tongue -- found her way to shell and said something intended to communicate surprise though I knew she suspected something from the very beginning. She licked her lips as if they did not belong to her, looked at me as if the needle in the meter were tilting so far in one direction, it indicated the meter itself was probably broken. How ruthless the mind is when the body is attached to it and serves its bidding! Sometimes I

wish the tips of my fingers didn't exist because that way I wouldn't be forced to put them to such delicate work as they were created for. I wouldn't be required, for instance, to sharpen any more pencils or run them (the fingertips and not the pencils, though this too is an intriguing possibility) along thighs belonging to those who squirm and make promises involving the end of the world and the very last breath they will take. But who, only moments later, it seems, begin to suffer from amnesia and claustrophobia -- ailments there are medications for, sure, but which turn incurable once they are centered in what we refer to as the heart when we mean something more than just that which is expected to get the blood circulating through the veins.



Somewhere down there in all those lights obscured now and then by the movement of the tree branches are Octavia and their son who was tall as a volleyball net even when he was young, an enigma to modern science to hear the midget Sunday's former companions and millworkers describe it, which they did at every opportunity they got, something as fascinating to them as, say, the origins of the great pyramid overseas or the lesser ones that appear here overnight on occasion along the roadsides. Made of sticks and rubble, leaning but almost always toward the east. This shouldn't surprise us given the tilt of the Earth as it spins on its axis and warbles through its mundane orbits around the sun. You can hear the creak of the machinery if you get somewhere so quiet as to allow it, somewhere without even a hummingbird in the vicinity to disturb your concentration with its wings beating at that staggering rate and the water falling from the sky because it has been traveling thousands of miles to get here and can't hold off any longer. It is heavy with its own desire. Sunday loads the explosives in the back of his truck and I assist, why not? If I don't, what am I going to say to those who ask me about the events of that evening after they have transpired? I am partial to stories of deception and heartbreak and ordinary human loss, but listening to them doesn't make me a better person. On the contrary. It makes me itch at the seams. As I understand it, Octavia stands at the end of a long pier and drops something into the water, something clearly heavier than the water itself which closes over it immediately and hides it forever from view. What I wouldn't do, he says, the muscles and tendons in his arms straining at the weight of our cargo, to interrupt the past at precisely that point where it is fixing to go off the rails, to careen into the future sideways and smoking from the

places where its bulk is rubbing up against the terrain that surrounds it, generating friction, generating heat to use against itself once the whole thing has come to its climactic, shuddering halt! Once the scars form and the soil grows moist again and you can hear something in the copse of trees two hundred yards away, something like a scream, but not one generated by terror so much as physical ecstasy. The one can seem so much like the other at times we will be excused if we refuse to follow our curiosity to the place where we think that sound originated, preferring instead to stick close to home and maybe lock the doors and windows and just wait for the snows to fall in a month or two and cover everything up beneath them so that maybe, with time, everything (and I mean of course mostly everything; the exceptions, I admit now on further reflection, must number in the tens of millions) will finally just go away.



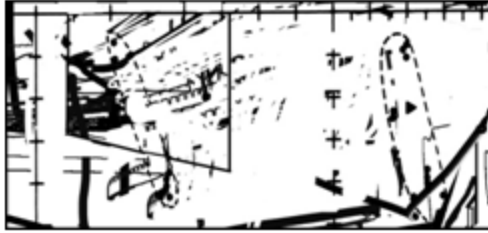
Eyes are watching from the tree branches. And culverts. You can feel them but you can't make out the colors or the angle and you don't know if what you imagine is identical to what someone else is imagining at exactly the same moment in a different time zone. But the question wouldn't even affect us if we weren't already in transit and stuffing ourselves full of Brazil nuts in preparation for a time of fasting to follow. Just the sort of thing that makes people wish they had been born to another faith while at the same time being able to appreciate the niceties of their own – like the colorful tales concerning the founders and the struggles they underwent so as to assist us in the struggles we are undergoing without being entirely sure what the purpose is. Why we are being asked to slough off layers of skin, for instance, when we don't have that many layers to begin with. On the other side of the veil, you find more eyes, of course, but one of them is blind, as can be ascertained simply by noting the color of it, or the lack of color – the milky hue that arises no doubt from a past traumatic injury or illness. We can count on one hand the number of times we have been asked to digest illness in this fashion, to take it in and relieve the original sufferer of his burden. It just doesn't happen that frequently, and when it does, the witnesses to the event all begin to hallucinate and some of them even approach a state like catalepsy. But you can tell they are not going to make that particular transition. As soon as they get close, as soon as their mouths become rigid and their breathing slack, good Samaritans appear from out of nowhere and provide them with the balm necessary to reverse whatever it is they are suffering from. In this way what you have are two separate yet simultaneous approaches – that of taking in and that of expelling from without, and still! still there is no

satisfaction to be had. No final escape from the original ailment any more than there is from a nickname that has been following you around from birth like a vestigial tail. Something embarrassing. Something you'd like to have removed if it weren't for the fact that surgical procedures are expensive and there are risks involved. You might not wake up from the anesthesia. Or you might. And when you do, you find that the whole world has been altered in some imperceptible way, some way so small as to be impossible to detect and yet it manages nevertheless to rob you of all ability to enjoy your surroundings. Even the pond where you like to go fishing is no longer, really, the pond you remember despite the fact that the same ducks gather there close to the shore and make their mild complaints. And the same nondescript ripples make their way relentlessly across an otherwise undisturbed surface.



Barns take on sinister aspects in the moonlight, seem to spin around on themselves as you pass, though this could just be a result of our having spent too much time in the navy where everything is moving all the time. Especially if you are in the Arabian sea, as opposed to the Caspian which doesn't behave the way you would expect it to given its affinity to other bodies of water. At least that's what I have been told by those who refuse to spend their lives circling the same patch of ground like buzzards. Or moles, more accurately, because moles too must obey the law of gravity down to the last letter, to the punctuation at the end. The vial in the glovebox is unmarked, clear as plastic but for the liquid inside which is the color of plantains, before they are peeled, before they have even fallen off the tree. Sunday says it's an extract of some sort that will give me visions, though he can't say exactly what the liquid has been extracted from, a natural enough question given the circumstances and one normally apt, when left unanswered, to cause one to give pause before commencing whatever activity suggested the question in the first place. If the pattern persists, no one will know anymore why we keep feeling nostalgic for things we had no initial experience of, like French kissing for the first time at an ice skating party on a frozen pond. Or listening to music that is just common barnyard animal noises layered on top of one another with the assistance of a computer. Suddenly, the veins in the tops of my hands seem overly prominent, seem to want to establish their own identities far from where they find

themselves presently, and the tip of my tongue plays host, I can tell, to some sort of visitor, a dancer of miniature proportions none too skilled at his or her craft. I'd like to think it's a female, but the mirror is of no assistance, so I can't tell. The mirror bobs up and down at the side of the truck almost as if it is not attached and when I stare into it for long stretches of time, I see the first faint traces of another world hiding at the back of this one, mocking it, imitating it in deadpan fashion like someone's little brother at a picnic where, as usual, few of the adults are having any fun.



Pleasures multiply until they are indistinguishable from their opposite, until they seem to lean over some sort of abyss and stare for an hour or more expecting I'm not sure what to appear. Other than the abyss itself which is a given from the moment we are born until the moment when we realize we have been born. And why this should be a cataclysmic event in all but name only. The days lengthen and then lengthen some more and eventually we find ourselves occupying a slate blue room and wishing we could make our memoirs mean something to those who might chance upon them at a garage sale, say, twenty years from now and who might leaf through them with the same distracted air of a man who knows he has to meet an individual -- a member of his extended family, or an assassin, suddenly become vital to his emotional or physical well-being -- at the airport in a little less than four hours. But he doesn't know what to do with himself in the meantime. I find the impulse to get all of it down on paper, or the electronic equivalent of paper now that paper has become both prohibitively expensive and unnecessary, a greater sin than that of forgetting. Though, to be honest, I don't really believe in the concept of sin so much as I believe in the need to embrace the concept so as to help keep us from poking one another's eyes out. This is why sometimes you will find me lurking about in the shadows behind the dumpster close to a construction site or behind the Thai restaurant where I met the woman who would later become my first wife, though she will deny the connection to this day. She will tell you I dreamt the initial meeting and that only the final days contain any reality whatsoever -- the dividing up of whatever few belongings we had managed to accumulate together, the

acrimony and incrimination. It's not like I go looking for environments, for locations to stitch together into one long and continuous backdrop. It's just that you have to occupy some patch of earth at any given time, don't you, and you can't stay in that place forever. Eventually, you have to move onto another one and occupy it for a certain duration, and then, of course, the process continues until you are dead and so no longer occupy any place, strictly speaking, other than perhaps the flimsy memories of those you came into contact with along the way. Those you recommended a song to once, for instance, or those who shared your bed for a month or a year and they recall some of the things that happened there even if they're not entirely sure they remember your name or what foods you might have been allergic to and so were careful to consume -- if you consumed them at all -- in only the most meager amounts.



Blossom is such a bitter word. It laments something that hasn't yet occurred. It dries out the corners of your eyes where the blood vessels get tangled up as if they have each been given separate and conflicting directions. Leap from one precipice to another and the last in the sequence seems suddenly less daunting, seems almost to require no effort on your part, the air around you providing a strange dreamlike lift that others reject out of hand as soon as you mention it to them. They peel the labels off their bottles absently, wad up the paper and pick at the adhesive. They start humming tunes under their breath as if they can't imagine what comes next, which words should follow which other words and in what order to best ensure some semantic continuity. Some means of delivering the message that, by all accounts, needs to get delivered if we are to stave off an invasion by the aural equivalent of locusts. Try to imagine a dwarf's fingers on the steering wheel of his pickup truck, the thickness and brutality of them, the almost sinister way they behave in unison while I am staring intently, focused and leering like a lunatic in a misguided attempt to bring back the ordinary way of looking at things I enjoyed before ingesting that cursed liquid of his, the way I looked at things before finding myself in the company of ethereal, animated combs (among other things), each about as long as my forearm and each possessing, apparently, the ability to speak, but only, it seems, to one another. The question becomes how do we know they are speaking if we can't hear them and we can't see their lips move because they don't have any lips? Only teeth, and some of these longer and narrower than the rest, indicating we should pay closer attention to them because we are liable to find that which doesn't belong the way we find sometimes an unopened jar of pickles on the shelf at the

library or hagfish slithering about in their own slime in plastic buckets on the pier far from their homes in the watery abyss. Let me back up. Let me concentrate my efforts for a moment on the ambient lighting inside the cab of the pickup truck, lighting provided by the radio dial, which itself seems to belong to a bygone era. When people still knew their mayors by name. When they could read from *Proverbs* in the morning and still have plenty of time leftover to cultivate the garden, to tell a filthy joke.



Allotting equal measure to both sides inevitably results in jealousy, in shouts from the darkened corner where someone wishes to express his contempt for the proceedings, but all language has left him. Only volume, only guttural wails remain to fulfill the purpose. He is neither tall nor paralyzed and when the birds begin to congregate outside the window in numbers too large to ignore, we are forced to admit our projections have been misleading, our nightmares have run aground and are leaking a neon green substance onto the sand. If we don't do something to staunch the flow, everything in the vicinity will be affected. Will turn, in fact, into its opposite, assuming, of course, it has an opposite. Some things, like fence posts, are unique in themselves and can neither be replicated nor assigned a place on a list if that list is intended to designate rank. You can determine this for yourself by checking for numbers and then reading the legend that either precedes the list or follows it. In some very rare instances, the legend throws no light on the list whatsoever. It attempts to draw all attention to itself through underhanded techniques of the sort we ordinarily associate with sexual predators, or the novel. At least as it was practiced at one time by authors too familiar to need mentioning. It has since been transformed into an entity having need of neither traditional legends nor erudition, though in the gardens (the real ones and not those found in the books themselves) they speak of both routinely, even bemoaning their disappearance with the same faraway sound in their throats they use without realizing it when the subject of childhood comes up and they remember that they never really had one. Or if they did have one it was short and knobby like a pinecone. Perhaps they traded

their childhood for some bits of soapstone and the rudimentary liquor one makes with whatever substance one happens to have on hand. Dandelions, say, or the apples that drop from the trees when it is cold and we are all engaged in searching (not desperately exactly, but not without a measure of urgency either) for someone to spend the evening with, someone we haven't met yet if only because -- everyone's being a stranger to everyone else by definition -- we can not claim to have truly made the acquaintance of even those we have been in the habit of waking up next to every morning for the past twenty years.



My eyes have this habit of finding what's out there and making it seem vivid. Dare I say it? Real. They refuse to engage in any of the subterfuge I would prefer, the kind of thing that is popular in New Delhi among those who studied at one time to be street magicians but found the market glutted. They turned instead to a kind of sales miraculous in that it succeeds in moving products that don't actually exist. Have never existed because they don't obey the laws of physics. Sunday is perched atop his pile of phone books, this being the only way he can see over the steering wheel. He operates the brake and the gas pedal by means of a couple aluminum contraptions he has strapped to his lower legs, extensions with what appear to be pieces of cardboard fashioned to the end of them in lieu of feet. It bothers me that I don't recall his strapping these things on; I don't remember the complicated process that must have been required when he first got into the truck. We are put together with materials remarkable for their durability, but finicky for all that, liable to unwind themselves without provocation like pieces of carpet in the corner of the room. Time has this bad habit of intruding itself upon our consciousness, demanding to be taken notice of even when there are much more interesting objects in the field of vision. Palm trees undulating seductively in that way they are known the world over for, kites painted to look like dragons or birds of prey in the sky. Is it any wonder we grow resentful, we begin to accuse time in our minds of playing tricks on us simply because it is mean-spirited and childish, the sort of entity that can't get over its own primordial image, its unhealthy fixation on the self?



The sound in the distance is Eulalie saying something I can't make out. The words are swallowed up by the forest which is immense and intent on covering over everything it comes in contact with, spreading its vines and tendrils in a luxuriant riot until everything that has ever existed is merely suggested in outline. The abandoned car chassis, the section of a fence that has fallen over because someone heavy leaned on it or because the wind concentrated its every effort on that particular two-foot span for no apparent reason. I think maybe Eulalie never really meant anything she said to me in the past, and I'm even starting to wonder if I am remembering what she said accurately. Maybe I supplied the phrases and the occasions for uttering the phrases and when she refused to put them together, to combine them in ways that I found satisfactory, I did that too and then told myself that my agency wasn't the only one at work, that Eulalie felt the same things I did, and that when we were alone together, the world would never manage to find us. I was as happy then as I have ever been in my life. And I was certain she shared in a portion of that happiness. But then, why would she be so far away now that her words can not survive the journey? They disappear in the wind, they die on the air itself, in the sunlight, as if they were composed of isolated bits of algae removed somehow from the medium -- water -- that would otherwise protect them. The evenings seem pregnant with menace all of a sudden, as if we can expect little from our existence other than mindless repetition punctuated by the occasional visit from shadowy figures whose main interest seems to lie in the reasons we have for that mindless repetition. They can't imagine why you would devote yourself to something over and over again

when it is clearly not to your advantage. They take notes and whisper among themselves and their eyes, if they can be said to have eyes in any but the most rudimentary sense, glow from beneath cloaks the shape of which suggests their heads are longer than most and inclined to move rapidly from left to right without breaking the vertical plane. This causes me such vivid and terrible nightmares when I think about it that I am afraid to go to sleep. So instead I stay up formulating the things I wish to say to Eulalie should she ever come within earshot again. The chances, I know, are pretty miniscule, but I like to say them out loud anyway because there is a certain music to them and they mean something when added together much the way the ocean means something when you put it in a movie. It means you can go this far and no farther. It means someone is going to wade in there somewhere around the third act, and -- unless the others on screen do something selfless or heroic to prevent it -- completely disappear beneath the waves.



The broad strokes divert our attention from their slender predecessors. And then degenerate. They cause those who admire them to repent, to wish they had never laid eyes on them after the turn of the century. When people were still looking for something to affect them as profoundly as does the ocean those who happen to live close to it, who routinely pull its contents onto their boats and dispatch whatever is still living with a blow from an oar. I like the idea of sharing our most intimate three or four minutes with people we have never seen before and are unlikely ever to see again, because you have to share these things with someone or else run the risk of becoming a lunatic in the old-fashioned sense of that term. Someone whose mood is ruled to excess by the cycles of the moon. Someone just as likely to know the bus schedule as he is to know his own hat size. Imagine if Octavia was simply a figment of Sunday's imagination, if she were no more corporeal than is the memory you retain to this day of the birds that congregated on the electric lines outside the windows during social studies class. You learned then what Sunday is no doubt learning now, his fever grown to desperate proportions like an infected limb, his eyes blood-rimmed and wild even on a night when the stars are reluctant to take part in any of the events that will later be described by those who were there as vividly as if illumination were not an issue. As if they could see around corners with little more than a hand mirror to assist them and, of course, the imagination which, the way I picture it, is an entity rectangular in shape and haphazard in its construction. A practical joke gone entirely too far. The explosives are heavy and they seem wet and complicated and not altogether stable -- making a distinct hissing noise inside the tarps that conceal them, or maybe that's a snake, a stowaway. As a consequence (if

anything at this point can truly be said to be a consequence of something else rather than simply a corollary of itself), I leave Sunday to arrange the bundles in whatever pattern he decides is necessary at the foot of the dam, and I climb back up to where I can see the lights of the town in the distance and listen to the water lapping at the darkness behind me. Miles of it, I imagine, backed up against where I stand. No one ever knows the names of those emotions that straddle a line, that begin in the readily identifiable and then slowly shade into the impossible to define somewhat like light on a window. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe if we know too much about what it is that gnaws at us ceaselessly we will begin to think there is a remedy for it somewhere. That we can escape it down the road by and by, and still have enough time left over to dry our socks by the fire.



It's possible to shrink the middle, to alter it irrevocably simply by gazing at it a certain way. For example, the leaves borrow their design from the shadows cast by the leaves. This informs us it's pointless to wallow in the sort of self-loathing that besets the others within moments of their being born, that argues for its own inevitability without pausing for breath long enough for the rest of us to catch up. I guess I am sort of surprised by how bright the explosion is, or perhaps by how dull it is reflected in the tops of the trees. Either way, the sound follows so immediately I begin to wonder if maybe the two aren't really connected after all, if they have simply been tied together by association, by proximity in time, so long now we can't help but to continue the tradition. Is it possible to love someone before you have met that person? And I don't mean by the term love what most of us mean when we use that term. I don't mean the physical intimacy and the false sense of trust followed almost immediately by a distrust so thorough and solid and implacable you might almost mistake it for a hunk of concrete poured somehow into the middle of your abdomen where much of the most vital viscera was housed at one time. And maybe it's still there, who knows? Maybe it has simply been displaced for the time being, scooted over to the corner where it is expected to continue functioning without drawing undue attention to itself. Meanwhile, the pain is exquisite. And while you'd like at a certain fundamental level for that pain to cease, there is a part of you as well -- probably not as ancient as the first, probably not as larval, so to speak -- that desires the pain to continue. To increase even, in increments each more intense than the one that preceded it.



The passage of several decades is required to see the results, and then only in the form of graphs and tables that don't speak to the soul. The soul is a concept that I happen to subscribe to but only because it was forced down my throat by an uncle who was also terribly fond of bourbon, the sort of man who belabored points because he didn't think anyone was really listening to him. He was the first to point out the practical difficulties of making love to a woman when you are made primarily of egg shell, but I had already been considering the problem from the oblique angles natural to childhood. Strange how an eye for detail changes the entire structure of one's life, the ability to see the particular with the overarching, to discern in dark corners other corners darker still and the cast-off bits of skin, the discarded fingernails and obscene notes written in mascara on cocktail napkins. Lately the difficulty seems to lessen inasmuch as I ignore it or embrace it as the situation warrants. Certainly the woman with dreadlocks and wolf blue eyes found all explanations sterile and merely had to point in the general direction of what it was she expected to awaken within me a distant memory, an urge and response housed within the entire species, or at least that enormous portion of it not so wrapped up in annotating *The Sagas of the Icelanders* as to have lost their will to live outside the study. I enjoy the sound of the spring bubbling to the surface as much as the next guy, and the birds floundering about in the mesh nets hung between trees for the express purpose of slowing them down, of making a meal of them should there be nothing left in the larder. We roast them whole, after plucking them of course and discarding the viscera, in which, if you look closely enough before discarding it, you will see patterns that can (so the story goes) inform you of what

is likely to happen in the future. It takes practice and a little guidance from a trained haruspex before you become really adept at seeing there anything other than random smatterings of blood and grease. But that shouldn't discourage you. After all, the future is going to happen whether you predict it or not. Imagine, should you get things right, the accolades that would follow! The shouting your name from the rooftops where people would have gathered, I guess, for the express purpose of shouting the names of those who had done something extraordinary. Otherwise, why would they be up there in the first place? And why would such an expression have been handed down to us from previous generations who tried, but failed, to imagine what we would be like and what we might think of them? Whether we would remember their accomplishments in architecture and the conquering of the seas. Whether we would consider them primitive because they too had stumbled upon twelve-tone musical scales and the equivalent of what we would call today expressionism and asemic storytelling but turned away from them because they didn't see the value. They simply did not understand what it was they had discovered.



By the time I reach the ridge and look down at what is traveling beneath me, the sound has already reached my ears – like that of a couple dozen locomotives all moving in a single direction. The water takes on a violent beauty as it careens and falls on itself, as it uproots trees and carries them along with it in the restless gray reflections of the moon. Then in the distance, the lights of town, as yet unchanged, an entire citizenry with no more notion of what is about to descend on them than I have of what a Gregorian calendar is or how exactly it differs from the other one, whose name I can't recall. Our worst instincts are separated, as I see it, by just a few degrees from our finest, the both of them so similar in the larger scheme of things as to seem identical. I imagine someone affixing labels, trying desperately to invent distinctions where there aren't any and then trying to undo those distinctions through tricks of the tongue, through puns and word play that don't fool anyone. That strike those in attendance (assuming anyone has made it past the guard dogs slobbering and snarling at the entrance) as half-hearted attempts designed to throw them off track, to distract them from the matter at hand, though they seldom reach any agreement as to what that is exactly. My first thought is of Octavia, though I haven't even met her; I wouldn't recognize her on the escalator if she was going up and I was going down. I picture racing to her rescue in the midget's pickup truck, careening wildly down the mountain roads just ahead of this tsunami Sunday has manufactured out of his lunatic fury, his imagination turned to murder because his son is loftier than he is and so proof and illustration of something sinister occurring beyond the confines of his flesh. I picture scooping the woman up

as the walls of the house disintegrate around us and riding those planks and pieces (the larger ones at any rate) to some place as yet untouched by moisture in extremis, unaltered by superabundance itself a lot like that said to affect the mind when it is facing its own imminent extinction.



Pump that space free of liquid, and you have an empty space but for the sound that attaches itself to your memory and refuses to relinquish its grip. It is very similar to the leech in this regard and reminds us that our time is fleeting but only if we regard time as something that passes. If instead we treat it as something to be harnessed and then whipped viciously we are less likely to suffer at its hands and so be forced to heed the taunts of others. I try to scratch out exactly what is occupying my mind at any given moment, but the nature of that thing, if you can call it a thing, never quite stabilizes and so doesn't lend itself well to any activity with a clear goal, like scratching. I suppose another approach might be more successful, an attempt in another medium that doesn't rely on words or fingers or sticks, but the matter to be relayed is resistant finally to every substance that is not itself, much the way the hand is best understood by looking directly at it and not trying to explain after the fact to someone who wasn't there what the hand was able to accomplish. If I borrow fifty dollars that doesn't mean I am destitute but it does suggest I am lacking in human interaction and wish to rectify matters by engaging in the one activity guaranteed to elicit emotional responses from those I approach. Ok, so maybe disgust isn't a bona fide emotion but the movement of the facial muscles just beneath the skin still makes for a kind of entertainment and frequently causes me to stop what I am doing and attempt to take mental notes of the sort that, if they were actually written down, then expanded upon with vivid illustration and commentary, might fetch top dollar in some marginally sophisticated circles. Even garner the sort of notice perhaps more appropriately belonging to the activities of the astronomers when they are arguing amongst themselves as to what a certain smudge in the

distant night sky means and what they should name it if it turns out to be something deserving of a name rather than just another non-object occupying an expanse of non-objects so enormous as to defy the boundaries of the human imagination.



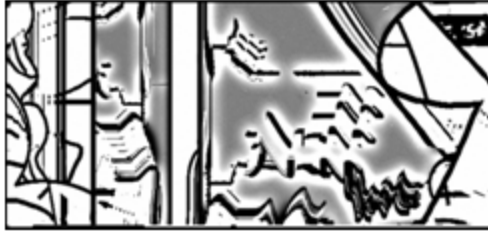
When stability gives way to something else, something like dandelion seeds tossed about on a breeze, you'll find people whispering to one another. Some of them wear gloves and they wave to you in the darkness but you can't see them because the light waves, by definition, are absent. They are all but mythical at this stage, something you might wish to write a treatise about if you aren't too busy doing almost anything else. I know Sunday the midget is gone, swept away as a consequence of his own lunatic passion, but I spend an hour or more after the sound of the water has diminished imagining him alive and well a mile or more downstream, having surfed the entire way on a tree trunk or a bit of Styrofoam washed to the surface just before he was about to drown. There is no reason for these reveries, no secret longing or philosophical position revealed beyond that which makes some of us wish for better circumstances for those we hardly know. Those we see sometimes at the bus stop clutching their meager possessions or recent purchases to their chests as if they suspect a falcon or something is likely to swoop down from the tree branches nearby and carry their treasure off with it into the heavens. To drop it maybe over the sea when it realizes there is nothing edible in its talons, that the world has played a practical joke on it once again. Eventually I make my way back to Sunday's pickup truck, parked still high enough above where we placed the explosives to have survived in one piece, though its windows are shattered, ten thousand diamond bits of glass on the seat and the dashboard. I search around a bit and find the keys where he has left them, not in the ignition, which would have been tantamount to an admission after the fact of something like suicide, of

knowing what he was going to do down to the minutest particle, to the breath that everyone he knows or had known in the past would be taking at this precise moment. Or an hour or two from now, it doesn't really matter. No, his keys are on the ground looking like a conglomeration of snails forced together by the mud all around them or the time of year when they are expected to shed their shells and prepare themselves for the slow secretion of newer and larger versions. They don't wish to be alone during this process. And who can blame them? Imagine how self-conscious you would be, how prone to depression. Imagine the change in temperature and how you would react to it if you had never before been made aware that there was such a thing as temperature or that there were properties on this planet subject to manipulation and so any expectation you might have that the world as you experienced it would never change was certain to be disappointed in much the same way you are certain to be disappointed when someone offers you a glass of water on a hot day and there are just a couple of ice cubes in it, each melted down and diminished into little more than a sliver.



The going is rough, the roads having been totally destroyed in a path about as wide as two football fields and travelling for miles into the town on one side and then out on the other. Fortunately I know my way around and can find alternate routes after having lived here for years and having dreamt about this place previous to those years for an equally lengthy amount of time. Strange how we believe almost anything someone else tells us so long as it seems at least slightly credible, so long as it doesn't require us to suspend the laws of physics momentarily, to announce to the world that we are not who we claim to be. But rather a phantom composed entirely of symbols and regrets, of limbs so long as to suggest malformation and incurable disease. Where are the sonic disturbances, the melodies and the words applied to the melodies, designed to attract attention? Where are the days when we were expected to hike a mile or more to the outpost and discuss the situation with men and women who didn't seem to recognize us, who thought perhaps we had arrived there from the mountains lately inundated with snow? Once arrived at my destination, I see something very like what Vesuvius must have done to her communities, only considerably more moist, mud and debris to a height of fifteen feet in the few trees and power poles still standing, bits of farm machinery wrapped like tinsel around anything sturdy enough to have withstood the water's advance – the remnant corners of brick buildings, stone blocks from the bridge upstream. Try ironing the image of a bird from the air through which it has already flown. You will experience an awe and frustration mounting to terror but where does this come from? Why must it follow this particular cycle when we are willing to explore

other avenues, other ideas still germinating inside our minds like corn? As part of the postscript you might consider making the main theme explicit, tying it to the movement of something that doesn't ordinarily move, that one might even mistake for a local monument or tower, just the sort of place teenagers visit when they wish to hide from the condescending or disapproving glare of their elders and get a little drunk. Where they think they might, if given the proper chance, escape the mortality that awaits us all simply by informing the universe of their names and the salient features of their biographies. The mediocre schools attended. The hopes that taste like licorice on their tongues when they speak them out loud, and that feel (you'll remember) oddly gritty -- like torn newspaper -- when they fall apart later in their hands.



The cutoff, the point of starting over ought, by rights to appear somewhere other than in the middle of things, the place where everyone is expecting change, sure, alteration, but in moderate doses. They expect the tone of the handwritten notes to become slightly more demanding or hysterical, but the paper should remain a similar consistency throughout. I try to obscure the sound of hammers outside with headphones and in those headphones music that seems strangely familiar if only because every song is built like every other song using common notation and instruments of the sort first invented in previous centuries and since perfected. Or perhaps abandoned. By people who long for perfection but realize that finding it necessitates that it be taken away from you almost immediately. This requirement is part of what makes it what it is and if you try to circumvent this requirement, you merely rob the perfect object of its perfection. You turn it into something very like yourself. Eulalie came down out of nowhere and lived for a while with me in the light. Light such as that you find in open places, or certain novels. Those by Czech writers, say, concerning themselves with what it means to be alive, to love and to suffer but to suffer nobly in the human confusion of that love. But it didn't last long. Somewhere out there, in the forest maybe, without even the benefit of a fire to dispel the gloom and the bone cold like that in castle walls, there is someone hunkered over tired old tomes written by people primarily interested in what it means to be dead, to live in darkness and to bring everyone with you into darkness, into insanity through a child's pretend knowledge of witchcraft and other nonsense. So now I live, without Eulalie, in a house. The house is like a place where people used

to live and when we look for some sign of them, some sense that they were here and had left their mark the way we might be said to leave our mark when we carve an animal figure out of soap or stand in the hallway and just reflect light back at whoever happens to enter the hallway and look at us, we find almost nothing. A few stray strands of hair caught in the fabric of a chair. An earring discarded on the carpet. To see these things, to know what they mean and to say them out loud and have no one hear you is unbearable. Pretty soon, they too begin to fade.



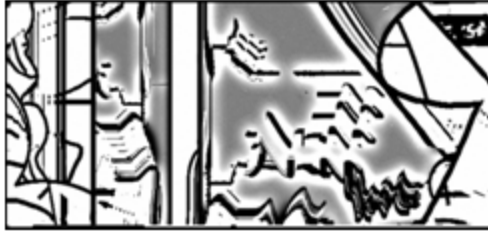
A slapping sound in the alley, a cool breeze carrying on it the scent of mud and someone's breath when she has been drinking vodka and talking too much, drying out the saliva and creating extra real estate for the microbes we always imagine as possessing primary colors and behaving in ways that seem designed to make them fascinating to those who find no fascination in their own kind. Who whisper to themselves in crowded rooms and invent whole worlds to occupy once their own has proven too narrow to suffice. At first I think it's Sunday the midget and Octavia re-united in the madness of what he's done, reconciled, at least momentarily, through annihilation and murder, but I am mistaken, at least as concerns the stature of the man. It is an understandable mistake, these strangers embracing on the slippery cement remnants outside what might have been their home, someone's home, or a tavern, say, frequented at any other time by people desiring the same thing everyone else desires, if perhaps too strongly and with little chance of fulfilling those desires except through desperate measures like lighting someone else's cigarette or falling to the floor and pretending to have a seizure. It is the fish, the carp, white in the moonlight and thick as an undersized man's arm, flopping heavily all around the pair where they pair themselves naked and gasping in the flood's aftermath, in the tangles of weed and wire, the pungent black river mud transported this far in something like protest – it is the fish, the carp that mislead me as to the size of the man's limbs and so when it is not Sunday the midget there (and probably not Octavia, but who knows; I've never seen her), just two otherwise anonymous souls pulling what they can together from the devastation, from the broken bricks and dog carcasses of a town they might not even ultimately belong to, I lose interest and

continue to what must have been three or four hours ago the outskirts. The frontier in a world where everything now is a frontier, if by that term you mean a place where no one knows what he is supposed to be doing. No one can precisely define his role.



Things leave off basically where they began according to the witnesses who number around a thousand souls and who are exhausted. They demand, in their own timid way, through hand gestures and an incessant rolling of the eyes, to know who is in charge and when they will be allowed to resume their own independent existences on the interminable grasslands of Nebraska. For my part, I wish we hadn't said the things we said to each other recently, instead choosing to say nothing at all and simply fishing for sturgeon on a lake that, as far as anyone can tell, has no name. It simply sits out there all alone in the dark when it is dark and the daylight when the day sees fit to arrive. You can't imagine how difficult that border time can be, that place between the two states where the stars are said to fade high up overhead. But I have rarely seen this, at least not since I've been asked to handle so much of the burden on my own. I know, I know, this will elicit groans and guffaws from those who have lost everything, have had to start over with their bare hands and little more than a couple dry biscuits in a plastic bag. But still, the dreams don't lie except when they find it in their best interest to change the details around and even then you can tell what it is they are up to – I think the deep pit described in the literature (and repeated by someone who has taken me into her confidence recently as if she too were familiar with that literature, as if she herself, in fact, had written some of it) can hardly be as treacherous as it first appears. If it were, if it contained some medium – some liquid or shadow – without end and without purchase for the hand of anyone who happens into it, then why are there signs posted all around it inviting us in? Why are there soothing sounds being emitted from it and aromas like lavender which, as everyone knows, is associated only with the finer aspects of

modern living? With spa treatments and bicycle paths. No, something akin to plain speaking can be the only explanation and when you attempt to turn all of this on its head, try to make of it a narrative involving the shattering of the soul down to its very foundation, you are merely feeling sorry for yourself, are engaging in that process my father used to dismiss as “the inevitable unsheathing of demons” even as he had only just recently unsheathed a few of his own and was being tormented by them nightly in the basement or the attic.



Below the surface barely audible voices gather and swirl together in intricate patterns like seaweed. Eulalie too tries to communicate something to me through hand gestures but I don't have the manual with me. I can't make heads or tails out of what she is saying. I remember a time when she concerned herself with the nature of the shell, suggested that I might want to re-imagine my exterior so as not to invite ridicule. She was worried I would be remembered solely as the man who represented something fragile and that living through suggestion in this fashion could only lead me to the abandoned warehouse where others just like me were busy destroying their minds with liquor concocted on the premises using copper tubing and ingredients growing and readily available in the empty lots close by. She elaborated for days. Shouldn't there be an extinguisher in the corner, something to allow us to halt all discussion at the point where we have become bored by that discussion? We have heard the same ludicrous scenario played out fifty times and more? You must remember the dual nature of all membranes – their ability to keep the outside world at bay must be countered by their ability to let whatever exists inside out when it is time for it to escape its containment. The same applies to yours truly, who couldn't imagine spending his every waking moment trying to prevent whatever is inside from spilling out at some point and getting lost in the sand at his feet. Running down in between the grains and disappearing much as the world disappears sometimes when we close our eyes, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it magnifies itself and intensifies and becomes something so remarkable and beautiful and strange, we can't take our eyes off of it. We spend the rest of

our lives trying to come to grips with what we saw even if only for that moment. We write about it in our tales that pale in their effect when compared to the original vision, but we keep at it. We lock ourselves inside rooms with no windows and only the one door that lets us in or out and we hammer away at those tales until they become something so un-tale like, so contrary to the accepted notions of narrative and escape, others begin to wonder if we ever really intended to capture anything significant with them at all. Or if instead we simply intended to lead our readers astray, to drop bits of cultural detritus and false leads into their path by the hundreds and thousands until the path itself became something they didn't believe in any more. It remained something to follow, though, only because they had to follow something. They had to keep moving so that the natural world couldn't close in around them and obscure their vision by turning them finally into tendrils and vines.



Rooms off the main hall appear occupied, or recently occupied, the blankets strewn about haphazardly like compliments, the kettle still steaming and a scent of flesh all pervasive. Where do we wind up when we rush headlong into the evening and try to locate strangers who won't remain strangers for very long? The pipes overhead hum with the movement of whatever they contain and the sound echoes off itself until I'm not sure which is the original and which the simulacra, though the question itself presupposes a knowledge of the inherent aural terrain that I do not possess, a knowledge of where the past fits into the present by imitating it as closely as it can using conjecture and the past's extraordinary capacity for recall. One night the rain was on the windows and the candles were throwing their inferior light against the walls and outside we could hear the cars moving about beyond the line of trees that separated us from the rest of the world. Hundreds of people had just graduated from some school the name of which escapes me, though I'm sure, given the location, it had something to do with locomotives, with arriving at your destination in the middle of the night when the stars are still thick as crystals above your head. Imagine gongs and the repeated shrieks of beaded lizards, or the electronic equivalent of such things piped in on a single speaker, and Eulalie holding to me as if I were the object missing from the center of her chest, as if we knew no more of the proposed dissolution of the universe than does a head of lettuce. The ferocity of her movements, the diamonds in her eyes. Today I hear the song again, the vocalist concerning herself with a madman in a dark room, but her solution is not our solution, is it? Eulalie, for all I know, at this very moment is crossing a rope bridge over a canyon and beneath her the world contracts into its habitual V. It changes shape and color

without the first hint that anything untoward is about to happen. And when its denizens find themselves crushed lifeless by the procedure, who is there to witness this? Who even remembers what each individual thing that had been there before but which is there no longer was called?

Series Two



As all roads have been washed away (or all that might reasonably be expected to lead somewhere in particular), I abandon the truck in favor of a johnboat somehow miraculously spared the violence of the deluge and make my way leisurely downstream. I expect at any moment to be set upon by survivors, scofflaws and tax accountants, looking to impose their worldview upon anyone attempting to operate without a worldview. Which is about seventy-eight percent of us now that the sky has ceased moving and its faraway contents have been frozen into indecipherable forms and patterns. How are we to resist the trite phrasing and overused vernacular that seeps from the very stones themselves, that turns purple just as soon as it hits the air with its heavy concentration of nitrogen and other less than useful elements and compounds we admire from afar precisely because they offer nothing of value? They are afterthoughts of the universe itself, an entity not exactly known for its complex thinking. Sometimes I think it would be better to just admit I suffer from delusions concerning the composition of my body, to see the trunk as flesh and viscera rather than what it is – eggshell; a solidified outer layer of calcium. Others might then be more likely to engage me in conversation or loan me a hundred dollars should I find myself in need. Karl Popper has taught us nothing if not to test our hypotheses by first assuming they can be refuted, and this one simply can't be refuted. As soon as I make the attempt, my eyes grow weak and my mind turns on itself like a scorpion in a hall of mirrors. The mind sees shell where there should be none and ears that are

symmetrical but still misshapen for all that. It abandons its position -- hands in its badge, its credentials -- and lights out for a peninsula where the locals and visitors alike are already gathered in enormous numbers, waving torches about in the air and dancing to the sound of drummers who are, it seems, paid by the hour to keep everyone around them whipped into a frenzy.



I inventory the empty places in my bones, in my organs -- the multiplying cavities and voids where I should find nothing but body, or something so like the body as to be its twin and replica. I take the resulting list to a physician, someone who can tell me what I am supposed to do to remedy the situation. I am hoping for sage advice, snippets and excerpts from Cicero, from the *Popul Vuh*, because there is something stale and unsatisfactory about treating the body as if it were a machine. Something to be tuned up and re-fitted on a regular schedule. Wouldn't it make more sense to wait for the body to declare itself a simple auxiliary of the mind before we attempt to make it whole again? Shouldn't we at least give it credit for trying? If you stand at the edge of a precipice and look down, what you will see is most likely a mirror image of what you expected to see well before you ever reached the edge. And by mirror image I mean something turned around, backwards. It is the opposite of that which should be. Something so familiar and yet completely broken as to remind you (hopefully before it is too late, before you go plunging to your death without meaning to, simply because once we get close to the edge of anything, we are somehow required to determine for ourselves if, in fact, it is an edge rather than something else; some other, less lethal, and therefore less meaningful, structure) of nights when the rain was turning to snow and you could almost hear the transformation from where you were lying on your bed by yourself in the dark. It sounded like someone grinding his teeth, but in an adjacent room. It sounded like the locked knob on your door turning.



The sun comes up directly over the place where the river turns away to the south, its light transforming the water into half-water and half-solid surface, even if only momentarily, the interval lasting I'd say on average about three-and-a-half seconds. The purpose in trying to determine this interval is lost on anyone who might be watching. From the hills where the light has yet to bring any relief from the darkness. From the windows in the houses that overlook the river here and there as if they were merely curious. I should, in going forward, banish all use of tableau. It hinders our appreciation of that which is being depicted precisely because the parts are subsumed within the arrangement of the whole. Or at least so goes the theory as expressed by those who make a living concocting theories that should not (according to other, separate theories) agree with the theories concocted by those who share office space with them. Very little of benefit can be said to result from this activity, but people still pursue it because they believe idle hands lead to certain exotic and completely incurable mental disorders. They are afraid of what their bodies are saying to them. My thirst is monumental. It refuses to slake itself on the handfuls of muddy water I bring to my lips directly from the current on either side of the johnboat. Soon nausea overwhelms all mental process, including the memory of the promises made to the maker of all things, and I understand the significance of the color black for the first time in my life. It is an all-pervasive entity the weight of which you would think would be much greater than it actually is. But weight itself is one of those fictions we can mostly do without, like how time lengthens when you are in pain and how it disappears altogether once you have learned to embrace that pain and make of it a tale with a beginning, a middle, and another

beginning. "Tale" is probably not the right term, but I suspect the right term has yet to be invented. We may have to wait decades, as much of our collective energy these days is devoted to defending the practice of digging holes in the ground for no apparent reason against the slights and insults of those who are not involved in the practice. Who see it as yet another instance of our placing too much emphasis on the value of the natural world and not enough on the value of that which lies outside it and so is harder to pin down, is harder to prove even exists except through the use of intricate analogy and the obsessive deployment of that old workhorse, terza rima.



An alphabet demands little in the way of obedience. It treats us as if we have always been present and will always remain present. Like light. Or what people call fear when they are searching desperately for some word to explain why they behaved the way they did. Tweaking the consonants more often than not results in a strange humming sound and then, unfortunately, we are back where we started, hoping for something enormous to jump out at us, to serve as a temporary decoy while the real culprits escape through a side exit. Eulalie has been patient, but that patience, you can tell, is beginning to evaporate, to ascend to the heavens where it will be broken up into parts and re-shuffled, distributed again on the breeze like water molecules and bits of pollen. She knows the late nights are not spent among the gentry, the flute solos not meted out with anything resembling caution. Her back is turned, the forest in the background seems to swell to twice or even three times its normal size, and I know instinctively this is not an illusion. Eulalie is in charge of everything we see; she controls it somehow with her mind, the same way we do, and if you were to identify the mechanism that allows it, what good would it possibly do you? How would you explain it again to others without feeling completely inadequate to the task? I stitch the requisite words together using something like thread, only I find, after much pulling at it with my fingers, it doesn't have any real substance. It is generated out of itself, and should you try to isolate it so as to be able to repeat this procedure, you would be left with little more than an eye that won't stop twitching or a memory of a time when you were trying to say one thing and you ended up saying another. God knows, there are plenty of those. When

pressed, Eulalie repeats her belief that jealousy is the thing that makes the sun come up in the morning. But by this, of course, she means that which, should you step off the side of a cliff or a balcony, will send you plummeting to earth where you will find, at best, all your bones have been broken. All the same, she is not happy at being pressed, and makes her feelings known. She does this by disappearing for weeks at a time, wandering off into the darkness of the forest and the canyons scattered about throughout the forest -- all while managing somehow at the same time to stay seated on the couch beside you in the evenings, to brush her teeth methodically at the master bathroom sink.



We trust the senses to function at half capacity most of the time, but this trust has not exactly been earned, and when we find ourselves deceived, we throw objects around the room in what might appear to an outside observer as a jealous rage. A tantrum having at its center the fear that we are turned inward on ourselves so thoroughly that we will never be able to escape. The grass grows to the height of the front windows and still we hold ourselves about the knees and whisper oaths that don't possess the ring of truth. That rely on geographical notation to such an extreme degree, they are likely to be studied in the not-too-distant future by ethnologists and archeologists hoping to secure valuable information about where we lived and why we lived there and why we ultimately disappeared. And sure, these are all questions we should be asking ourselves beforehand, but who has the time, what with the gazing at the stars at night and the long discussions about what we should do with the information we gather? Should we write our observations down or just let them hang in the air like musical tones? Those that originate not in the mind of the musician or even in the belly of his instrument, but in the turning of the wide world itself, the motion that is motion without our ever experiencing it except through the ears. And even then, some people claim you must be deranged in order to receive the full benefit, that this derangement can not be accidental or haphazard. It must be something you accomplish yourself through the use of substances like the exotic powders I frequently keep with me in my jacket pocket. Or simple practice, whichever is most effective. I'm not sure I agree, though, with the majority when it comes to this issue as they have been misled frequently about almost everything, and when I hear what others have referred to as the music of the spheres, what I

hear is a kind of grinding like that you might expect when someone is attempting to shift gears on a standard transmission from second to third and gets stuck back in first again for a moment without meaning to. Does this make me unbalanced or am I just simply more attuned to my environment than most because I don't believe it possesses any reality in itself and must first appeal to my imagination before it can be allowed to exist at all? Does it mean that I am overly fond of those powders I mentioned earlier that taste faintly of garlic and come in packages with inscriptions on them in foreign languages? It seems no two of these packages are adorned in the same language. Each is unique. Some of them even utilize no recognizable alphabet at all -- just pictures of tigers on them, and colobus monkeys and vine-smothered plants all rendered in an unusually delicate hand.



Off in the distance, the mill wheel stands frozen. An emblem of something as yet to be determined. A reminder that all reminders are superfluous. The closer we get to it, the further we are from that state we refer to as euphoria because we don't know what else to call it. We haven't any experience in this part of the world and so we necessarily rely on descriptions we have brought with us from home much the same way we brought our livestock and our particular way of tying knots. Under the shelter of the rock overhang, tiny invertebrates scurry about in the moist soil and one can scoop them up by the dozens in one hand. It isn't wise to do so, though, as they are perfectly capable of protecting themselves with venom. Of course, I enjoy the sound of screaming as much as the next guy so long as that sound is far away. But the plan seems to involve drawing a line nearby and then seeing who might be willing to cross it -- if, that is, anyone can be rustled up to serve in that role. Right now, we are completely alone and have no desire to play the part of adversary ourselves. Not that the part is mandatory or that we wouldn't do a good job. It's just that the ground rules seem to have been written up ahead of time, and in haste, so that violating them would no doubt bring about more than just simple forfeiture. Extinction is not too strong a word. Better to hearken back to a time when the air was cold to the touch. It carried with it a promise of romance acceptable even to those who didn't see themselves as susceptible to that particular set of emotions or circumstances, who didn't believe they were suited, for instance, to walking hand-in-hand from one ordinary place to another in the company of someone else, who still envisioned a future sitting alone in a chair facing in the direction of the newly-risen sun and drinking from a decorative glass full of absinthe. They were, of course,

mistaken, but not in the way you might imagine. They were destined, many of them, for positions of great responsibility on aircraft carriers or sitting atop towers made of glass and steel. For long and unbelievably fulfilling lives spent in the company of people who hadn't even been born at the time of their original, desolate visions. People who would one day be engaged in delivering their eulogies, in filling those eulogies full of references to Meister Eckhart and those nineteenth-century theosophists who presided over séances where the furniture rose and rattled about the room on occasion like outsized crabs hoping to get themselves reunited with the surf.



Each day is the day it could dry up completely, the alien voice that issues from your throat at moments when you think you have nothing whatsoever to say. Moments when the adrenalin is flowing due to unforeseen circumstances – ladders leaning suddenly backwards, meteorites passing by so closely overhead you can hear the air expanding. Still, the calendar keeps turning itself over and the phrases add up to numbers beyond counting and those who listen to you, when they are not too busy baking bread or fiddling with their toes which have become rough for some reason at the edges and threaten to turn in on themselves like the reproductive appendages of ferns, think that perhaps you are not the one uttering these things. They are being channeled through you and when you disappear, they will be channeled through someone else more intelligent yet and less likely to crave attention for something he hasn't actually accomplished. After three or four days living off of whatever happens to land in the vessel – grasshoppers especially which taste a little like popcorn coated in a very thin layer of glass – your mind too would begin to consume itself. You too would see chandeliers in the tops of trees and hear the voices of what you begin to believe are Scandinavian politicians emanating from the empty spaces on either side of the river. The line of reasoning that leads to this conclusion seems clear and consistent enough to convince you of the inevitable truth of the hallucination, but there is something missing. A card with no names on it. Merely a pen and ink rendering of the sun. The inner harmony one experiences when the outside world is conducive to the continued existence of all who inhabit it. I pull the johnboat to shore finally believing that the house on the hill

is calling my name, or someone inside it is and to continue downriver would be tantamount to admitting my name no longer belongs to me, that I am no longer worthy of this or any other name because I no longer recognize them. After successfully maneuvering the muddy stretches stitched loosely with cattails and the footprints of any other creature that did so beforehand and then suffered its inglorious fate, I approach the house with a trepidation like that you might feel when the violins and the violas are sawing away at deliberate speed and you can't tell where that sound is coming from, where it originates. Perhaps the musicians have secreted themselves away in a nearby dwelling and have left the door to it partially open so that the soundtrack they produce is still audible to anyone standing outside the dwelling, but they can't be seen themselves unless one finds the proper angle, something within a range of, say, two or three degrees and available only to those who are feeling particularly adventuresome. Risking splinters and certainly worse injuries still, they would have to clamber up a pile of castoff planks and bits and pieces of dried shrubbery and other debris stacked up outside the entrance to the dwelling by whoever abandoned it due to economic woes or a violent threat by the neighbors some fifty to one hundred years ago -- this being the best estimate of anyone with a keen eye for architectural detail and a familiarity with the rich oral history of the region in question.



Blank slates don't exist. Only canvases with lots of contours, places where colors can hide, where bits of sand and grit and cast-off fragments of skin can accumulate. Be careful, then, when examining why you do what you do, your hidden motives and hobbyhorses. They just might turn out to be treacherous, but not in the way steep hillsides are treacherous or the way wild servals are treacherous when you keep them in a cage. Instead they can cause respiratory distress months and even years after the event. They can bring you to your knees and leave you there as if they had struck you with a blunt object. Our capacity to endure pain is trebled in the process but this still leaves it far below the crucial threshold and causes a great deal of amusement among the other life forms that share our planet with us, the round worms and the amoeboids, in particular, who you wouldn't ordinarily consider the sorts of beings capable of mirth. But here again, we have been undone by our own nearsightedness, our tendency to ask questions only after they have become obvious, after the answers to them have become as crucial to our survival as does a canteen of water should we find ourselves afoot in the desert wastes east of Cathedral City. I admire the sharp edges, the desire to make everything within the work seem related to everything else if only by virtue of the fact that all parts of it are similar in appearance and possess angles of more than forty degrees. The work itself seems to float about three feet off the ground, but this, of course, is an illusion, something those charged with its installation had to figure out how to do for themselves because the work did not – so the rumor goes – come with instructions. In fact, no one ordered it, no one had any idea it was on its way. Its arrival caught the entire staff off guard. As a consequence, its creator is not credited. No

one knows who its creator might be. The museum's curator doesn't seem to have been comfortable with the designation of "anonymous" either for reasons that may have something to do with the curator's scholarly background, the procedures he learned and adopted while studying overseas. Or it may simply be a matter of not wishing to offend anyone by making assumptions about its creator's intentions, his or her desire to remain out of the picture, on the sidelines, as it were, when the whole world has decided in the meantime to come gawking, has decided the work is the very emblem of everything they have ever found wanting at the center of their barely tolerable existences, everything they have ever wanted so strongly they could taste that wanting, that longing, in their mouths like a sprig of parsley wedged between the teeth.



A woman stands at the side of the house, hoeing a path of earth yellowed by whatever is coming up out of it and whistling to herself. Her hands are big around as catcher's mitts and her skirt is long and raisin-colored with patterns that remind me of the cryptic markings on the tarmac at the airport. The circuitous route seems most favorable to catching her attention without in the process startling her, but I learned ages ago to be direct especially when you are unsure of the outcome. Better to find your way by the light of the sun than to quibble with hand-drawn maps of the sort that turn up here and there in the marketplace and promise to lead you to wealth and riches beyond your wildest dreams. But usually just get you lost in the desert. Assuming, of course, there is an expanse of land in the vicinity dry enough to deserve that name. To beckon to spiders and mites and little else besides those creatures that intend to consume them if they can survive the conditions. Sometimes, if you sit still long enough, directly under the sun, or even at an angle, these creatures will begin to speak to you as if you had landed somehow in the middle of a fable. What they say is determined, of course, by the needs of the plot, but if you do away with the plot altogether, so as to free up your fable to become some other, more respectable art form, you'd be surprised by what the little collared lizards, in particular, might say. They have a way of capturing the complexities of all non-human life as lived on our planet in the perfect phrase or bon mot. They make apt and thoughtful allusion to Shakespeare, a knowledge of which they must necessarily have come to secondhand. Someone in a window on the upper floor notices my approach and begins not so much to scream as to yodel a welcome which serves,

you can tell by the tone of it -- by the volume and urgency -- as a warning as well to her companion tending the patch of earth. When this woman turns, it is with hoe held high above her head, the dirt-stained blade quivering a moment as if it is so anxious to plunge itself deep inside my head it can barely contain itself. If it had lips, it would smile, but only because a smile at this point would be the cold-blooded thing to do. A semi-reptilian acknowledgement that something unfortunate is about to happen and there is nothing I can do to stop it.



The brochure makes mention of the lake as if it were something to bore others with on your death bed, something to paint or explore come Tuesday when you have nothing else to do. When the highways are emptying out and you can't figure out why. We listen to the advice of the red-headed woman in the too-tight spandex pants but secretly, inside, we are telling her what we think. We are listing the reasons why the lines around her eyes remind us of home, why the scent she wears during the day ought to be forbidden. I like the idea of saving your best ideas for the boat trip over because that way you will have something other than French poetry to keep yourself occupied. You will have limits placed on you by the atmosphere itself, which is full of flying insects suddenly and has a tendency to aggressively refract sunlight even when it's getting close to evening and the light is growing scarce. If no one else is going to acknowledge my presence, though, I am just as likely to start singing. The songs don't have to defuse the situation, but it's nice when they do. It makes everyone sleep better. In my back pockets, small grains of unidentifiable material vie for space with the air itself and when I stick my fingers in absently (when I am speaking to the red-headed woman for example and I don't know what to do with my hands – I don't want them flapping about in front of me like recently beached fish), this material sticks to the flesh on the ends of my fingers and refuses to disengage until I run my fingers under hot water in the sink. There is a lesson in there somewhere, a physics lesson, no doubt, concerning surface tension and how there doesn't actually have to be a surface involved for you to experience the tension. But I am getting so sick of learning things without trying, I don't

insist on sharing this knowledge with those who otherwise might benefit from it. The people standing around in the hallways when I come and go, those smoking their miniature glass pipes and muttering invectives at me under their breath. The delivery drivers trying forever to turn left. We can't imagine a more mundane existence than the one we have been blessed with at any given moment, and yet, just try to take it away, try to snatch it up like a coin from off the table and listen to the way we complain! Listen to the vehemence with which we insist we were only daydreaming for a moment. We are now going to turn our attention unfailingly to those things that matter -- that separate us once and for all from the monkeys and the marmosets who (I suppose as a result of this particular announcement, or one very similar to it made within the hour) are even now turning back flips in their cages.



The eyes, you can tell at a glance, are unseeing, blind as if they had been sculpted from sand. There are days when you begin to wonder if your eyes are the only functioning pair in the cosmos, and if this is the case, will that be sufficient to order the cosmos in just this fashion and no other? With the mountains worn away by time like the teeth at the back of the mouth? Those designed for grinding. Or if designed is not quite the proper term, perhaps “sculpted” will do. “Molded” if by this you mean the same process as turns stone perfectly round when caught in a natural depression at the bottom of a river. I know at least thirteen individuals with a last name closely associated with northern climates, with people at the helm of vessels made of cured walrus hides strung across a framework of local wood, most likely birch. And strange green lights moving across the night sky at a leisurely pace just as if they are not entirely convinced they are made of light after all -- down at the core where the vital parts are rumored to lie -- that maybe they are instead an amalgam of cruelty and ennui. A masculine entity turned feminine, or vice versa, I forget. The front door is already open and I walk in ahead of my silent companion with the hoe still poised above her head. The thought of fleeing crosses my mind but I am not interested in it, much the way you can turn down the most alluring offers from people who do not appeal to you for entirely banal or obscure reasons. The way their mouths tilt to one side or the other when they speak. Their habit of guiding every conversation toward the trip they took once to Thailand. I’d like to think the nights are not as dark as they are going to seem from this point forward, that the unguents and salves we have concocted over long centuries to soothe the blistered skin are relevant to the discussion even if only because they contain secret ingredients

the list of which might terrify us should we ever manage to get our hands on it. Human bone would no doubt be included. As well as the stuff inside it – the marrow – which is, they say, the color of rust but only when it comes into contact with oxygen. Your guess is as good as mine as to what color it might be in the meantime. If, that is, it can be said to be any color at all when it is hidden away from view like that in a body that relies on the marrow's brittle container -- our long bones and our short -- to keep it from crumpling into a quivering, shapeless mass.



What we call remote control works by keeping you in the distance, by making you a mere memory of what you were before its introduction. It borrows its aura from the soothsayers and the cretins living in the hills, mixing up potions from whatever berries they can find and the abundant sulfur water that bubbles to the surface. I jump higher than I have ever jumped after consuming some of it, but the height still isn't all that impressive. You could stack two entire lengths of it one on top of the other in a suitcase and still have room left over for your socks. It's possible, though, our despair is caused entirely by the body and the demands it makes on us in the form of desire for other bodies and the simple matter of moving from one place to another. Which turns out, on closer inspection, not to be a simple matter at all, but a vast and complex interaction of parts and chemicals no two of which can safely be reproduced under laboratory conditions. This is probably just as well, because if you could reproduce them, if you could turn these interactions loose on themselves, you would quickly run out of space and be forced to lease additional facilities, not to mention having to witness a proliferation of blind will and agony not seen since the days of the Spanish Armada. Something unwelcome precisely because of the historical connotations. When I am twisting the knobs, I expect some sort of response – a change in the frequency of the sound that is being emitted or increase in illumination in the room if that room has been wired properly and if it contains works of art that people no longer pay money to view but which they retain a memory of sometimes fifty and sixty years after the initial viewing. The explanations for this extraordinary recall, as you can imagine, run the gamut from an instinctual pairing of the object viewed with the loved one sharing the experience to esoteric

theories involving the shaping of the intellect by the willful or emotional distortion of time. What we would today call the manic state become permanent and all-absolving. But of course we don't know what we are talking about. We have never actually studied this in any reputable academic setting and when we try to register for classes that might cover it, we find there are no classes offered, only a few marginally-related seminars with titles so ornate in their terminology, we begin to wonder if maybe they aren't really titles at all but secret codes intended to warn the previously initiated away. To encourage them to meet instead at the Denny's across the street where they can proceed to do whatever it is they do – maybe even expand and replicate the universe, or, conversely, shut it down completely -- from the large booth in the corner.



Dull flashes illuminate the night sky about half a mile away, continue for at least five minutes and are then followed by a darkness so intense people begin to wonder out loud whether or not the planet has stopped moving. Whether it has dropped precipitously from its previous place into a void long suspected to rest just beneath the planet (if terms like “above” and “beneath” hold any meaning whatsoever in a place with no up and no down, a place without any quantifiable boundaries whatsoever) but never before confirmed due to a lack of imagination by those who send probes and other mechanical devices into orbit. Who see there what they want to see, which is usually some version of themselves, albeit without the glasses, without the barely perceptible gleam in the cornea of the eye. Eulalie dons her favorite feathered mask and makes her way from the portico to the land with no trees and draws on a cigarette long and slow as if trying to emphasize a point she has been too timid previously to state. This is the thing about Eulalie that makes me a little bit impatient, a little bit angry, but only the way you get angry at the weather sometimes when it doesn’t behave the way you think it should. You know it is irrational to do so, but attempting to withhold or repress that emotion will only succeed in creating greater difficulties – changing speech patterns, for instance. Intestinal distress. The lisping plays a factor in whatever happens next, and we often have to tell ourselves that whichever words get spoken are probably not the same words that mean anything, that actually tell us anything of value when it comes to things like who is in our corner and who is determined to avoid corners altogether because they leave you very few viable options for escape. When I cave in to the pressure,

when I decide finally to set out in pursuit just as, of course, she desires me to – because why else all this over-the-top posing and tacky melodrama, why else the sound of cranes far away in the night sky like dreams? – Eulalie is choking. Not with emotion, certainly, and not as a result of her being exposed to noxious substances for perhaps the first and only time in her storied life, but because she has failed to take into account the size of certain food items relative to the size of the opening in her throat. Something must be done, and I do it, but I am not proud of myself afterward. I do not repeat the story over and over again as others are wont to do when they wish to make themselves the center of attention. When they wish those around them to take note of how extraordinary they are even when they are (as, when it comes right down to it, all of us are in actual fact), as ordinary as a plain brown seed pod in a field full of seed pods.



The meal is an unidentifiable fowl, miniature birds laid out upside down on plates the color of plums. The woman, Beulah, puts down her hoe and invites me to occupy the chair opposite hers in a dining room about the size of a boxcar and decorated with portraits of what I take to be ancient family members, though guessing in this instance is probably just as risky as flight. It sends you down a winding mountain path on either side of which you may eventually expect cannibals. Or people dressed like what both you and they imagine cannibals must dress like, including of course dried grasses placed strategically about the body and arm bands made of copper. With designs etched into them by hand or machine, it's always difficult to determine which with the naked or untrained eye. Even the trained eyes sit in the sockets of heads that must, on occasion, forget whatever training has been drilled into them in the past and proceed according to the emotions which possess a formidable wisdom of their own. It's when you combine the two, when you allow the one to incubate the other, that you create an environment conducive to the spinning of tales that have no teller and so do not qualify, according to standard definitions, as narrative proper but instead fall under that most coveted of all categories, the un-categorical. They seem to engender themselves out of nothing the way salamanders are said to appear in the mud after a conflagration, a natural torching of the forest by lightning strike or even (so long as it is not too extensive) lava flow. The two of us are served by her idiot son, the hulking youth who watched my approach from the window and warned Beulah in a voice that still hangs in the air as if it were more properly an aroma. When not fetching further delicacies from some unseen kitchen, he stands in the corner with his arms dangling petulantly at his sides and

his tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth. Any attempt to make eye contact is met with a grunt like that you might expect of a loved one sleeping when you ask a question directly into her ear. This is almost immediately followed by a confession of some sort, though you must possess the key to the arcane language it is uttered in to be able to comprehend what exactly is being said. Unfortunately this key, of course, is available only in your own sleep and your own dreams where it inevitably sits idle -- it goes to waste -- because you do not need it in that particular universe. You are fluent the moment you arrive.



What we tell each other in moments of crisis comes flooding back two or three days later when the crisis has dried up, when the concept of time itself has abandoned us to our own devices. It shrinks to about half its size and if you go looking for it, you must adjust your expectations accordingly. When I try to accomplish the same thing by examining a candle flame through a magnifying glass, the pain is so severe, it reminds me of the time I fell down a flight of stairs and there was no one there to minister to my wounds. I was as alone as if I had woken up at the south pole. We like to think our trajectory is something that can be mapped. To prove the point we frequently produce oversized pieces of paper and point to certain parts of them as if to signify that is where we are located at any given moment and that we will be located somewhere else shortly. But don't bother to get out the instruments that link these places together. The rulers and the felt-tip pens. There is no time for that. And even if there were, you'd just come up with some random design we wouldn't recognize. A parabola, say, with its center of gravity disturbed by the fact that there is no gravity in that place where parabolas exist. That theoretical place full of dots and lines to connect them and a whole lot of nothing in between. Perhaps I am being too technical. I have this bad habit of explaining things I do not understand and ignoring those I do. I probably picked this up from my brother who was older than I, and so prone to ridiculing my every decision even when that decision was sound. When it might have resulted in my getting the girl, for instance, or at least impressing her with my ability to make a decision and stick to it, impressing sufficiently enough, I suppose, for her to hang around a while just to see what might

happen. Of course, my brother was flesh and blood and held that against me as well, accusing me of adopting an outer oval covering of calcium – a shell, in other words -- just to try to embarrass him, to “one up him”, as it were, just when he was starting to come into his own. When he was starting to understand the difference between the carburetor and whatever other parts and structures you are liable to run across in an internal combustion engine as you are trying to take it apart. When he was just starting to think his life might not wind up being a nearly endless series of events after all, with no means of determining how they are related, how they are connected one to the other outside of the perhaps entirely coincidental fact that he is present bodily whenever such events occur.



We are dealing here with a concept belonging to that category of concepts that has a name in Greek we haven't gotten around to translating properly yet. Perhaps this is due to the fact that we don't know Greek, but it could also be because we have yet to realize the full implications of the concepts themselves, of what will occur once we take them down off the shelf and let them loose on the world. We discover then that the serial nature of every event will lead some to cluck their tongues disparagingly. This doesn't mean we have to do the opposite. It doesn't mean we have to go around toasting everyone's health, but, of course, to refuse is going to earn us a reputation for poor breeding in certain company. A reputation for blaming other people for our own sins and then starting to believe it ourselves. Beulah is recounting a past visit to the chiropractor where she claims the walls were covered in dollar bills and when she attempted to make small talk, the others in the waiting room lowered their eyes to their shoes and shifted about nervously in their chairs as if she had pulled a revolver from beneath her skirt. That she was, in fact, concealing a revolver beneath her skirt should not have mattered, nor should it have induced such a reaction unless some of her fellow patients were possessed of extraordinary powers of intuition like those that lead most of us to formulate some version of Zeno's paradoxes before we have ever even heard the name of Zeno. Once you have mastered the idea of fractions, you are already halfway there, so to speak. And then there is the little matter of the imagination of childhood which, in most instances, turns the physical world into a workshop, a funhouse and torture chamber all at once, without any prodding from the learned anthologies. Without any assistance from those who take great pleasure in breaking the experienced

universe down into its component parts and then insisting that those parts too must be divided, and so on, ad infinitum. I think Beulah's monologue unendurably dull and the fowl excellent, possessing something close to the flavor of those nights when you stay awake for hours, not because you can't sleep, but because you refuse to. Because the agony of putting sleep off one more second multiplies itself and soon all of existence is an amalgam and parade of pain and ecstasy and half-dreams with no end in sight, something leaving us with no reasonable hope of (and, perhaps as a consequence, no desire for) escape.



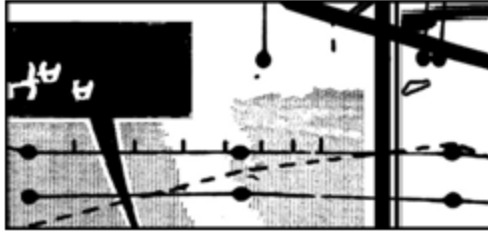
I must take certain sounds back, must retrieve them from whoever held me enchanted when I first heard them – the dull ring of a brass bell or the throb of a propeller moving through the air. This is something I have promised myself so as to avoid sinking someday beneath the weight of everything that belongs to other people, or belongs to my interaction with them, particularly if that interaction had something to do with the flesh of the thigh or, more accurately, the renaming of the flesh of the thigh to something less clinical sounding, something more personal, like the “tabula rasa.” We love complication so long as it functions like oregano, so long as it doesn’t make us wish we had spent the day in bed as we had originally intended. Thumbing through out-of-date newspapers, hoping to find in previously overlooked passages information about the other people who happen to live on our block, or the coming of the circus, which can not help but be of interest now that we are old enough to purchase tickets for ourselves. I think sometimes I will spend the rest of my life longing to inhabit a moment that happened toward the very beginning, when everything was still in flux and nothing was certain. There was no way of determining which moments were of value because they all came and went so quickly. And let’s be honest, our judgment when we are younger is judgment, really, in name only. It actually more accurately resembles knee-jerk decision making of the most irresponsible sort. Tossing colored stones onto the ground and trying to discern a pattern. Saying the opposite of whatever has been uttered just moments before. This is why it’s probably best if I simply accept what has been given to me by fate as if fate were an actual thing. As if you could see its outlines in the mirror if

you were standing in the other room and you just happened to glance in that direction. Of course, should you insist on examining the mirror more closely, on going into the room to search in the closet and behind the door for whatever it was that had been reflected, you would most likely be confronted with nothing. Why? Because fate finds bald curiosity of this sort anathema. It thwarts it at every corner. And who can blame it? Some things you just shouldn't know, some things you just shouldn't see. These are rules that have been established for our benefit and we violate them at our own peril. The moment we turn our backs on them, the moment we decide it's better that they had never been formulated in the first place, we find we occupy a world so perilous and primeval and odd we have no way to give it so much as a name. We run entirely dry of appropriate designations.



When my eyesight begins to waver and the head on my neck seems terribly heavy suddenly as if containing the essential substance of some other head, I reach for the pills in my coat pocket, the yellow ones in particular which have never yet let me down. But Beulah waves the idiot over to intercept the palm of my hand before it can reach my mouth. Objection is the lingua franca of the obtuse and poorly-oriented, but sometimes it is a necessary entertainment. It reminds us of the days when we reached barely to the headmistresses' knees and yet there was an aura of invincibility we wore around our shoulders then like a mink. We spoke up in unison and the drapes were pulled aside, however briefly, to allow us a glimpse of the planets wheeling about in the night sky overhead. Of course, this recollection is no doubt faulty as the planets were large and crystal clear like mountains when you are standing on the summit of a mountain and gazing contentedly at its nearby twin. Still, the memory is a living thing and for this we are thankful when we remember to be, when we are saluting the memory and other incarnate attributes with a glass of absinthe and our feet are already tingling with yet another onset of gout. I have no idea if the idiot consumed the pills himself or if he merely knocked them to the floor or if Beulah commanded this interference because she was insulted by the sudden lack of interest in her tales. For my part, I had already entered a place so full of darkness I immediately suspected it was artificial and refused to grant it any legitimacy. I skulked in the corner as if someone could certainly see me and would understand what this gesture meant. I mention the incident only so as to convince the reader it was the fowl which had been tampered with, laced with whatever

nightshade the two of them were in the habit of relying on to immobilize their victims. I know there are those who will accuse me of tampering with my own consciousness on this particular occasion because they know I have done so on almost every other. But I think we rely on patterns entirely too much when it comes to human behavior. Why not just let the image of the lightning strike take its place for a month or two and see what happens? Why not just admit your time will be better spent and the investigations that follow will inevitably yield results that you were not looking for and so did not expect. Maybe they will even make sense after all the other factors have been added in. The Mediterranean flavor of the background music. The constant drip of water threatening to form ornate stalagmites in the distant future on what's left of your kitchen floor.



Expect to court disaster twelve times before you learn your lesson. At least that's how it was explained to me. I don't pay attention to advice unless it comes from someone with close-cropped auburn hair. This happens so rarely, though, you might almost say I have no real guidance at all. You might even claim I make things up as I go along. A real lone wolf. A sage without so much as a balcony to stand on, or under. But you'd be wrong. At any rate, I tried to follow this particular nugget of wisdom, even had it engraved on a pocket watch I carried around with me so as to be able to tell what time it was at a moment's notice. But I failed, as I almost always do. Sometimes I wonder why I bother attempting anything at all. Fly fishing. Listening to music originally composed in China. Trying to decipher where each section ends and another begins. Maybe there are no sections, maybe everything is supposed to bleed into everything else and we are just supposed to absorb it in enormous, indigestible chunks. But even here the language gets in the way: you can't have chunks without boundaries, without some way of distinguishing where each chunk gives way to another, where the sky and the trees and the clouds insist on their own autonomy and therefore throw a wrench (or something very like a wrench) into the whole procedure. I find myself in a conversation with no ready means of extricating myself. We stand at the juncture of two important roadways so the traffic is fairly heavy and it makes a noise like outsized animals snoring. In between words, between my hesitant attempts to make sense of those words as they come my way one at a time, I think perhaps I shouldn't always be wishing to escape conversations with other people, that I have

been very lonely lately and maybe participating more actively in conversations such as this one might relieve some of that loneliness at least temporarily. Certainly that's how it used to work, when I was younger and I hadn't heard people say yet the things they will inevitably say to me now whenever they begin speaking. I hadn't solidified at the center like a hunk of bauxite. But the harder I try to pay attention, to participate and even work up the courage to respond, the less anything Beulah says makes sense. When I latch onto her sentences, when I attempt to turn them over appreciatively and take them in, they disintegrate. I feel a panic like that which sets in when the structure you are standing on begins to tilt to one side. At first, you think everything will be fine, that whatever is causing the structure to lean will rectify itself of its own accord. That the structure will find a place of equilibrium and everything will go back to the way it was before -- with the sun just going down in the distance behind some trees and the other people standing on the structure with you discussing a little light politics and what goes into the making of the perfect martini. All the while. they look each other up and down in wanton appraisal before the aforementioned leaning (which does not, incidentally, right itself, does not lessen its angle and acceleration in any way, but in fact increases both at an alarming rate) encourages them to start screaming.



Central to the idea of bathos is one involving enlightenment, and it has always been so -- the two out strolling, gathering flowers and other organic materials together, hand-in-hand, for more than two thousand years. Though you have to wonder what the relationship was like prior to that, if one or the other even existed at all. Today we are grown complacent in our certainty that we have all but mastered the finer points and are simply buffing the extremities and accoutrements to a high gloss. We are saying our prayers in a mock solemn fashion because we think prayers something old-fashioned and slightly ridiculous, like enormous lizards with horns on their heads stomping clumsily about on a modern expressway. The reverberations reach our ears after they have reached the ears of other people with less-than-pleasant plans in their heads, with ideas that involve turning all ideas into mere shadows of themselves. Brief notes and commentary of the sort that make us wonder what all the fuss was about when they were first penned by men in the habit of wearing outsized curly wigs on their heads (even, I like for some reason to imagine, when they shed the rest of their clothing and climbed into bed). I sense a shift coming on, one that causes the hair on my forearms to stand straight up but leaves that on the back of my neck unaffected, as if there were two separate components and each is unaware of the existence of the other. The only way to join them again, to undermine this dichotomy, is to peel some fruit and take the rinds and grind them into a fine powder and then mix that powder in with a pre-determined amount of sulfur and saltpeter and see what happens. Probably it will blow up in your face and disfigure you, but who knows? Maybe the almanacs are correct when they predict something less dramatic. Something akin to snowfall without the wholesome associations that

might otherwise convince us we are living our lives properly when we know, in fact, deep down inside our bodies, where such knowledge is apt to generate itself from the simple warmth and movement of our blood, that we have done things we should not have done. And when those things reach the light of day, when they are discovered by those who share our lives with us, who sometimes wipe the dried mustard from the corners of our mouths and speak to us in their sleep from that place where they are dreaming, we can be certain a new regimen is forthcoming. We can be certain a sparse and lonely existence – a veritable tundra – awaits. But, not to worry. We can get used to that too. We can get used to just about anything so long as it involves the body or the mind, one at a time. If they are both mixed up in it together, however, there is little hope. You might as well start walking in any direction whatsoever and plan on stopping only when something immovable stands in your way. And there is, of course, nothing in the whole wide universe that can't be shifted, however slightly, from one place to another just by our looking at it, by our holding it carefully in our gaze.



When I've lost consciousness, I occupy a world full of winged creatures, but I can't make out the exact construction or organization of their bodies – where the face is, whether they have hands or claws or some other feature as yet to be identified by natural science or the empirical arts. I can only be certain of the existence of the wings because of the tell-tale sound they make as they pass by overhead, and also because there is a certain logic that accompanies our drug-induced visions which says a thing is whatever the vision proclaims it to be and then we are compelled to believe it because the logic says so. It is very similar to axiomatic geometry in this regard and brings me back to a time when I was just under six feet tall and those who passed me in the street tended to look back at me aghast but I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it had to do with the tooth I had intentionally knocked out of my mouth with a hammer. I could go into the reasons I had for doing this (and believe me – they were compelling at the time, involving desire and love and strict rules as to how that love could be expressed and by whom), but they seem unconvincing now, to say the least, as surely anything must once it has been uttered more than two or three times in a row. It's very like an image you pass repeatedly through a copy machine or the sound of your own voice played back to you from a recording device when you are expecting to hear nothing more alien or jarring than some Brahms on the radio. Not because you are particularly fond of Brahms, but because it has been a while since you last heard any and the

law of averages applies even when you are not discussing life and death circumstances but simply what might come out of a box with a dial on it. I should like to be able to bottle the experience I have before I wake up, to capture it once and for all in a pill you can carry around in your pocket and pop down your throat when the weather is turning sour or the discussion around the dinner table is just the sort of thing to make you wish, for the thousandth time, that you had never started a family to begin with, that your sperm or ovarian cells had dried up in their housing and you had been left free to wander the countryside enjoying the blissful silence or near silence the natural world revels in when it is devoid of all people. But then, aren't there kingfishers chattering in the tree limbs by the river? And doesn't your heart make a very distracting sound when it is doing whatever it must do to keep itself from giving up, from joining the rocks scattered about on the ground at your feet in their glorious -- and, of course, lengthy -- imperturbability?



On the cover of Hayman's Proust, something miniscule has just moved. Something so small as to suggest it is not really there at all has diverted my attention away from where I had originally intended to aim it, namely in the general direction of the standing water out the window. Or maybe the stray piece of cardboard poised to turn circles beyond that. We can strain our senses to the breaking point and still not retrieve the information we desire or understand the information we do manage to retrieve, but this doesn't mean we are fated to stay locked up inside our own minds forever like actors no one remembers the names of anymore wandering around inside black and white films. It does mean, however, that any attempt to break free, to escape our original bondage is likely to appear to others desperate and pathetic. Akin to trying on pants two sizes too small. Or walking down the middle of a side street, all but daring the occasional car or lumber truck (the driver of which is, no doubt, lost and in danger of receiving a citation) that happens by to continue in a straight line as if you weren't walking there. As if you were in no danger. Even Eulalie counsels restraint and her throat is more supple than mine, her hearing so acute as to suggest she hasn't aged a day in more than twenty years. She keeps a room at the very top of the tower now, or so I have been informed by those who claim to visit it at regular intervals. Their reports are not to be trusted. For one thing, they contradict each other, one recalling a thick sable blanket on the bed, another recalling no bed at all but a hammock fastened loosely at either end into the wall. Sometimes (as is the case with Eulalie, now grown so mythical as to seem something that should be made of marble rather than flesh and blood or whatever it is she

is actually made of) when anxiety finds us and we haven't been looking for it, and we haven't been trying to avoid it either, the sound it makes is very like someone regaling a crowd around a fire with tales that have no beginning and no end, that seem almost to spin themselves into being out of the very light itself and the surrounding darkness, and maybe too the soil underneath, which is damp and full of rotting plant matter and millipedes. Eulalie explains that there are only two ways of ascending the ladder she sends down. Neither of them is obvious, neither lends itself to what we like to call intuition or common sense because we have no better term for the state in question. We don't even have time to memorize the faulty terms, to put them to practical, if imprecise, use. When I am at the bottom rung looking up, the fear courses through my body like conger eels in the shallows around some uninhabited island. It makes me wish I had never set eyes on Eulalie all those years before, wandering alone on the desiccated plains of the Llano Estacado. Or was it in a courtroom? No matter. It's time to start climbing, time to place one hand above the other and repeat the process until such time as it no longer seems like a conscious process at all but is rather something accomplished solely through instinct -- like breathing or perspiring or conjuring up the shadowy niches and seldom-seen corners of one's old childhood home when one is deep in the act of dreaming.



The ambience of the sepulcher greets me as soon as I come to, rushes in headlong like a herd of buffalo and I think for a moment that I am still unconscious, but the dull throb at my temples tells me that the phenomenal world and its inevitable suffering have found me again and it will be a while before I am granted the privilege of visions again, if only because that which we find benign, even joyous must be offset by its opposite now and then so that we don't wind up succumbing, just giving into the sweet and heavenly and deciding never to move our limbs again. I mean, what's the point then? Some will tell you to share the secret with others, with those who are still searching, but it's entirely possible the primary ingredient – that which makes this joy possible at all – is the secrecy within which it is housed. And when you burst the membrane, you destroy the very thing you wished to communicate to others, to share with them the way you share venereal diseases (when you have them) or your passion for old stamps. Which is to say with a crooked smile on your lips and an excuse cooked up already in your brain. Your brain is no doubt fevered in any case and so has nothing better to do with its time than to visualize vistas, entire countries spreading out before you on the alluvial plane that takes its name from the first European to set eyes on it. And by the way, what have you discovered? Who will be able to distinguish between you and the person sitting on the subway across from you seventy years from now when neither one of you will be here to explain things the way they need to be explained – that is to say with telling detail and the apt illustration drawn from life and not the print encyclopedia which is at least a generation now out of date. The pain in my head is quickly

replaced by that at my wrists where (I deduce because it is dark and I can not see, and at any rate my hands are located now behind my body) I have been secured to the floor by some sort of metallic restraints and each time I move or try to shift position, the restraints bite deeper into the flesh of my wrists. As a consequence, I decide pretty quickly a passive approach to my predicament is to be preferred, at least for the time being, until I can determine for myself where I am and what is happening and why there is the sound of water splashing against a hard surface somewhere close by but I can not see the water or the surface against which it splashes or even, for that matter, my own my lower legs and feet stretched out somewhere in front of me on a very cold dirt floor.



One begins to trust the overhead electric lights will not go out without reason in the middle of one's speech on parsimony and the inflated value of friendship. And whatever reason is forthcoming may be filed away under a number of categories. Smoke and mirrors. Latex facsimiles of prominent organs. I try to back my way out of the situation by nodding politely and looking those closest to me directly in the eye, but everyone has his own favorite method. If I were to stop and consider each based solely on its merits, or those things that strike us as meritorious simply because they begin with the letter "D" and they have an aura about them like that which besets epileptics just before the fit, I would be here until next Tuesday and the animals wouldn't get fed. They'd turn to bones and ligaments almost overnight, that's how high their metabolism is! This suggests they are not animals in the ordinary sense of that term and so therefore can not be considered native to this continent (we will forego, for the moment, consideration of further outliers – planets and stars and galaxies). They must have been delivered from some other continent and whoever did the delivering thought he'd get one over on us. That which was delivered mimics the body type and various temperaments of our favorite species so closely no one but an expert would be able to tell the difference. Of course, you don't have to be an expert to recognize something is amiss when the hairs on the back of your arms stand straight up while those on the back of your neck remain relatively inert. Some suggest this

means they are not wired properly. But you know better than to take such claims at face value because someone once told you claims are the life blood of all knowledge and therefore that which must be spilled before someone else can succeed in tampering with them, before someone manages to soak them in the semantic equivalent of soap, say -- or a mixture equal parts resin and gravel, in its odor and texture -- and then sends them somewhere so far away your only hope of ever seeing them again would be to get in your car and just start driving and vow never to stop until you had reached a place that hadn't been given its name yet. At any rate, not one we'd recognize as possessing the qualities one normally associates with a name. Like the ability to distinguish the person or object it is attached to from any other persons or objects it is not attached to. Or reminding us of a time in the past when we were so caught up in the existence of another, we had begun to believe there might not be any more room left inside for that entity we had until very recently thought of habitually as ourselves.



Under the bottom drawer, fastened to the particle board like a remora, you'll find a large envelope with two thousand dollars in cash in it and a handgun that doesn't work. Because someone dropped it into the pond and when he fished it out again the damage had been done. Even his reputation was never quite the same again, taking on hues of foppishness and self-recrimination that don't attract members of the opposite sex. They don't always repel them either, but the pathways have diverged and when you are forced to choose, how do you make that decision? Which criterion takes primacy of place and how do you identify it from among so many others of its cousins? Eulalie pours the coffee out on the ground and takes apart the Styrofoam cup and examines the patterns in the stains on the inside as if she believes they will tell her what the rest of the world has not been able to. Namely, why she can't ever feel fully fleshed out and solid instead of like some entity composed primarily of gauze and left to float about on the currents of air that hang close to the surface of the Earth because they are afraid of being swallowed up, of being absorbed completely in the more forceful currents circulating higher up in the atmosphere should they decide to head in that direction. For no particular reason (what you might, if you were feeling generous, term an "accident") or because they consider their own situation too modest to continue. We are never satisfied with staying put until we reach the age of -- I don't know -- what's my current age? Even that bit of retrenching will undoubtedly send shivers down Eulalie's spine because she thinks age the thing that ruins all, that lays a patina of disease over the entire universe and keeps it from being the sort of thing you might comfortably keep in your pocket.

Like a quarter. But when you ask her how old she is, she changes the subject so abruptly you think maybe she is auditioning for a role. She is trying to take the spotlight with her into the bottom of whichever cave it is she claims to reside in during the day. To keep track of these exaggerations, the evasions and out-and-out mythmaking, I have purchased a notebook full of ruled paper and I jot them down after she has uttered them, but not immediately because I don't want her getting suspicious. I wait until later in the evening, when I am alone and the coyotes are talking to me from outside. They are calling to me from the dry spaces between my house and the highway, spaces where the dead weeds are chest-high and a strange dark scarlet in color in the moonlight, almost as if the weeds have been painted there by someone who wishes to demarcate a border, who wishes to say this is as far as you need to go, at least with your eyes.



The tones repeat themselves until the pattern you identify after enduring several cycles becomes something other than itself. It morphs into its own mirror-image, meaning something turned backward, headed in the wrong direction. And you can never be sure if this is due to the mind's inability to maintain its mastery over the input it receives or if that input -- the stimuli, the tones themselves -- must change because everything must change, must mutate when repetition is involved. Think of your own genetics, think of the childhood games involving speech and secrecy and the desire to win favor among peers who considered you somewhat less than human. A water dish sits just within reach, though it is terribly painful on my shackled wrists when I try to bend over to take a drink. I hold out as long as I can but thirst is one of those things that drives the organism and you can no more ignore it at a certain point than you can ignore the sound of your own name when you are sleeping. It pulls you up from the darkness as if you were attached to it by a hook through the upper lip. I can hear whispering in other parts of the cellar and at first I think they must belong to those who placed me here in near total darkness, who affixed me in chains -- Beulah and her idiot son -- and I am afraid of the sound of these voices the way you are afraid of lightning before you do the mathematics involved in determining odds and emptiness, the way you are afraid of blood especially if it is your own. Though I have known someone in the past who found the sight of her own blood so alluring she would spend her evenings raking at her flesh with bits of broken bottle until someone pointed out that she was merely putting off until some indeterminate future point what could be hers the instant she threw the broken glass away. What this might have been no one bothered to say, but she understood by osmosis or analogy

and from that point forward you could find her, serpent-shaped scars and all, wiping down countertops with moist cloths and whistling tunes that had no real structure, that circled on themselves like mentally-ill crows and reminded those who heard them of the time in their own lives when the sound of someone else's voice, no matter what it was trying to accomplish, no matter what it was proclaiming or undoing or embroidering, could never be as compelling as their own.



What if the shell, in this instance, serves a function contrary to that it ordinarily serves? What if, instead of protecting the fragile inner contents from the hostile outside world, this time it is designed to protect the outside world from whatever is contained within? I am beginning to suspect my position is not merely a matter of bad luck and worse timing; perhaps all of this has been planned and I am the victim of a brand of consciousness that, despite its being ultimately unidentifiable, remains consciousness for all that. That can not shake off its nature no matter how hard it tries. In this it is similar of course to yours truly, but this doesn't mean it is identical. Sometimes we imagine the contours of the cosmos follow the contours of the gray matter and any attempt to separate them will destroy both. It is a symbiosis that allows for only one player and so seems, at first glance, a contradiction. Something to placate with mineral rich clay and puzzles, with soothing words that nevertheless suggest in combination a second meaning – a revaluation of all previous statements in the light of the final statement. I palpate different portions of the shell when I am otherwise unoccupied, sitting by myself with a glass of wine and listening to the radio for clues as to what is happening at the antipodes. I expect hollow sounds but usually receive something like that one makes when stubbing a toe, that involuntary exhalation so deep within the body as to suggest it didn't originate with that individual body but found its genesis in the mud of some far away swamp so removed in the dim past of the species as to seem entirely made up. Rendered from an artist's best educated guess and years of practice of the sort those of us less dedicated to our crafts can only imagine by closing our eyes and concentrating on a

single, deeply upsetting image like a beloved pet struck lifeless at the side of the road or someone we know and consider ourselves to be on good terms with suddenly achieving spectacular success in his every endeavor while we are left to founder about just as lost and confused and ineffective as we have ever been. In this instance, we are left certain that the future, because it has never been anything other than a rabid continuation of the present, something without imagination or mercy, will inevitably bring more of the same, and it this knowledge that leads to visions of such intensity as to suggest the brain has been damaged irrevocably, and that this damage -- the lesions and unseen scars, the consequent vivid hallucinations -- can't help but work to our advantage.



The scheme, it turns out, involves the production of a narcotic batter that puts more workers in the cellar and ensures a never ending supply for Beulah and her progeny (of which, it is rumored, there are more than just the idiot son) who have, over the years, managed to develop an immunity to the active ingredient -- mulberry leaves chewed to a watery paste and then fermented. They remain awake and coherent while their guests descend into hours of unconsciousness, and so may be secured for slave labor. It is this batter that coats the fowl and makes it taste sublime, like nothing you've ever tasted before unless, of course, you've been a guest in this place and managed to escape, something that the other occupants and I fantasize about together over the next couple of days. Once we've gotten to know and trust each other, a task made the more difficult by the absence of light and the manacles that keep me fast to the floor but which, the others assure me, will be removed before the week is out. It has happened to each of them in turn and none of them has been able to determine so far the reasons for her own release. Perhaps we are enslaved even when we think we are free to move about from one place to another, when we think we are riding our bikes, say, on a trail carved from the side of a mountain specifically for use by bicyclists and those who venture away from the town center because they don't like the idea of a center. They don't like the concept of that which is equidistant from everything else around it. It suggests a hierarchy, a right place to be and a wrong place to be, and limitations placed upon exactly who can enjoy this area and who can't. In this way value is bestowed and people are encouraged to take ownership of something that

should (according to those formulating the theory) by rights belong to everyone equally the way sound waves, once let loose upon the air that contains them, belong to everyone in the vicinity so long as they have ears with which to hear them. I'm not convinced, though, that what we call freedom and what we picture in our heads when we use that term amount to the same thing. Or even that they should, consistency being the thing that limits freedom in both concept and actuality as much as do iron bars or edicts of the sort despots are in the habit of issuing. Especially when they begin to sense that no one wants them around any more. No one feels the need for such heavy-handed protection as might have been warranted once upon a time when the surrounding precincts were full of bandits, but is no longer necessary now that they are filling up with tract housing and convenience stores that carry milk at inflated prices.



Each generation of the particular species of insect I have in mind lives only about thirty eight minutes, so those observing can determine the effects of any single mutation on an entire population within a day or two. They can then communicate this information to their peers via megaphone or fax machine. What ensues is a free-for-all very similar in appearance to those that take place when you toss a handful of cash down from a balcony onto a crowded floor of any sort. People come scurrying like crabs with their claws in the air and their mouths take on what appears to be a permanent grimace, at least from our vantage point standing above them, among the plastic ferns and the Modigliani prints. Certainly there are steps you can take to prevent the situation from getting out of hand, but these are so numerous and so needlessly complicated it might work just as well to create a list of your own and then ignore it completely. When Eulalie feels an itch that is in reality not so much an itch as a circumscribed ache with no one in particular at the other end of it, she gives me a call and I come running, but in the meantime she has usually decided to vacate the premises and the rest of the evening becomes a game of guessing which way to turn and what phrase to call out into the darkness in hopes of getting her to respond. My money is almost always on some form of flattery, a lengthy commentary on the inverted V's of her cheek bones, the protuberances on other parts of her body as well and why they are so unique as to defy ordinary nomenclature. We will have to find new ways of referring to them by searching though a dictionary and selecting terms at random. The results will startle us into something like a coma, but only for a moment. Only for about 7

seconds, to be exact. After that we are as energetic again as if Eulalie herself has injected us with a syringe full of synthetic adrenaline. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to wake up next to her some mornings, the sun filtering in through the cheap muslin curtains, the sounds of bus traffic and the endless rounds of tennis played nearby finding their way in through the cracks in the plaster, and under the front door where (in one scenario notable for its plausibility, for its evenhanded manner) someone is knocking so insistently I begin to wonder if maybe I am in danger. Whoever is out there doesn't seem content to take silence for an answer, which means, I suppose, he has some knowledge as to what is likely to have taken place here during his absence. Assuming, of course, he has been absent, he hasn't simply been lurking out there from the beginning hoping to gather evidence of both the audible and visual variety. And then do what with it? I wonder. Drop it in a drawer (or to be more precise – drop whatever medium has been used to contain that evidence, to store and preserve it for posterity) where the other evidence he has gathered over the years has been collecting dust and even warping the wood of the drawer there through its accumulated bulk? Which, of course, makes the drawer very difficult to open. Pretty soon – because one is never satisfied one has gotten to the bottom of any mystery, and so one continues to hunt up clues and further bits of flotsam and detritus for what amounts to an entire lifetime --- it will begin to seem as if the drawer has been permanently sealed shut.



The adventure in question generates itself from nothing more substantial than the cold sand under your feet and the nitrogen in the atmosphere. It breaks free of its containment, its purely physical barriers, like one of your more powerful animals at the zoo, and subsequently increases in size three or four fold. After a while, it must, of course, narrate itself into a corner, though this is not necessarily a negative thing as the corner is replete with odds and ends that remind one of potential emblems just waiting for someone capable of recognizing them as such and then deploying them appropriately. A discarded pair of brass knuckles. A tube of lipstick and a losing lottery ticket. I suggest we make of them a string of meaningful -- or at least eye-popping -- moments. A panorama heavy-handed except for the final frame which must be somewhat enigmatic because we wish to win a prize. And sure, we don't know where the judges come from, if they even speak the same language we do. In terms of structure or nuance or linking verbs. But at night, when I am sleeping and the insects gather outside my window and attempt to fill my dreams with their troubling, spastic visages, I come to realize it doesn't matter who is on your side and who is merely a step or two in front of you. All that matters is that the tendons in your hands and those that attach your feet to your legs via the ankles have not been made brittle by age or dissolute living. They still function the way they were meant to, which is to say, at ninety-seven percent of the capacity of the other people in the room. Maybe the outcome is fixed, the decision made before there is even someone there to make a decision, before the first human brain has even come into existence what, a million years ago? On the savannah, but not

the one you are thinking of. In fact, our definition of savannah is going to need a major overhaul if it is going to remain sufficient. It will need to include the concept of standing water at the corners where the vipers congregate and there exists a certain hushed undertone of despair like that you might expect at the end of the volleyball tournament when everyone has left the gymnasium and most of the lights have been turned out and you are sitting by yourself re-imagining the past twenty four hours, trying to determine how exactly you wound up here when you didn't know any of the players or anyone in the stands. And the best you can come up with is a theory having at its core the idea that the past is simply the one possible future that is no longer available to you. It has been eliminated from contention the way we steadfastly refuse to consider those who lose their hearts to us completely, who announce the fact of it in maudlin songs they compose extemporaneously in the kitchen or on the back patio by themselves under a yellow moon.



She emerges from the darkness piece by piece as if she were composed mostly of what we call memory, when we probably mean something else. I've never seen her before and memory is not something you can trust to hold such extraordinary pieces together. It misses stitches and falters, falls all over itself even when moving at a leisurely pace. Which is, truth be told, about all it can handle most of the time. The exceptions come when someone needs to be rescued from an underwater vessel or a cage, or when the lights are blinking at a frequency designed to induce seizures. The same frequency they have outlawed overseas because they are worried about what will happen to the future generations already among us. In the form of zygotes, I suppose. Or certain unfulfilled fantasies involving wraith-like entities that float about above our heads. It's not often we can contaminate that which hasn't happened yet, and when we are given the chance, we must embrace it. We must dial up the appropriate ritual from among a pool of such two thousand and more strong. The origins of most of these are obscure, but we can be certain they have origins because everything must start somewhere. It can't simply will itself to be. Or, if it can, I imagine that counts too. She tells me her name is Anda as she moves in close, hovers before me and apologizes ahead of time for what she is going to have to do. I am not afraid. She seems conjured directly from the primeval, a paper-thin vision straight off the plains and my body reacts to the stimulus as it might to a sound that meant something two million years ago – a low rumble in the center of a mountain. The snapping of twigs in the forest twenty yards away. Anda carries a talc-yellow bowl in her hand, the bowl brimming with a substance, a

paste smelling strongly of mulberry and what can only be described as halitosis, a rising up from the interior and a stagnating behind the teeth. She dips some of it from the bowl with a wooden spoon, sits down directly on my lap and slathers it over my lips and tongue. Without the fowl to soak it up, the concoction is overpowering and my head begins to swim immediately, Anda's coal-black eyes darting about in my vision like rodents with nowhere to go but still operating on an overwhelming instinct to avoid standing around in one place. They know doing so makes you an easy target and eventually even a myth of the sort that quickly gets replaced. A myth that instructed, at one time, countless souls in what it means to be a soul rather than simply something animated by desire, but which now hangs out, biding its time, in the backs of old books in the library, the kind with broken spines.



Each sphere acts as a container of some sort. You can see whatever it contains moving around inside it, shuddering and rolling, pushing against the sides in a desperate attempt to break free. The spheres are arranged in neat rows five and six deep along the banks of a stream, on the muddy part that rises higher than the rest of the surrounding earth and otherwise serves to keep the stream from regularly inundating the environs around it. The question naturally arises as to the nature of whatever placed the spheres here – was it beast or human, something with foresight or something obeying simple instructions planted in its even simpler brain millennia before? We will, of course, never arrive at any satisfactory conclusions if only because conclusions are themselves remnants of a time we no longer inhabit, no longer even recognize when it flashes up on a screen and we are asked to comment, in writing, on what we have seen. On whether what we have seen makes any sense in the context of the present. Or when it is combined with what we haven't seen, with what has merely been implied by the setting we find ourselves in and the fragrances that keep wafting in through the open windows. I am feeling more fatigued by this procedure than are my companions and they can barely keep their eyes open! I think sometimes we are subjected to interrogation simply to satisfy the will of those who would otherwise be without any discernible will at all, who would languish on a pile of pillows until someone discovered them there, all jutting hipbones and skin the consistency of paper. Maybe it's time we began asserting our independence by following certain footpaths through the grass, those that lead the way out of the city -- out of civilization itself -- by way of the junk yard and the water treatment plant. Maybe it's time we started pointing directly at other people's chests with

our crooked index fingers just before making that journey out. At least this way we'd be clear of the overhanging power lines that sag and spit their malevolent energy, their unseemly apparitions, at us every moment of every day without most of us knowing where exactly these apparitions are coming from. We just wish they'd go away. Think of the publicity afterward! The headlines screaming our triumph in capital letters, the public servants committing the civic equivalent of ritual suicide -- saying not their own names but someone else's name over and over again, repeating it until that name begins to sound like a collection of nonsense syllables conjured up in order to cast a spell. The birds, for their part, know better than to hang around and let such sounds affect them adversely. They scatter from the branches of the trees, fly as high as they can until they appear to be mere specks against the overcast sky, remnants of some memory that moved us once to tears but which now seems flimsy and alien. The sort of thing you dispel with a quick shake of the head, followed by a long swallow of whatever liquid is in the glass you just happen at that moment to be holding in your hand.



Central to the myth is the idea that we share certain affinities with creatures that do not resemble us at first glance. They have no faces, for instance, and no means of locomotion. They have no means of communicating with the outside world at all except through the myth itself, through the perpetuation of the myth by those of us who have a stake in seeing it continue. The reasons for this are myriad and sound, when you listen to them listed one after another by the experts who have gained a great deal of notoriety as a result of this enterprise, like place names elaborated for no other reason than to induce in the listener some sort of trance so that those who serve in the role of accomplice may go through the contents of their coat pockets. Again, there are innumerable waves of vision that overtake me, some of them so vivid as to seem like celluloid recreations of events from my own recent past, and some as murky as the air above Denver when the clouds are full of whatever sediment from west of that location is light enough to be borne aloft. I enjoy the passage of these images before my eyes and am tempted sometimes to participate in them, but I know, however remotely and abstractly, that this is not possible, that my role must remain solely that of observer, much as it must when I am not having visions but instead just engaging in day-to-day activities. I can't imagine a more supple and rewarding existence, though, than that offered by the passing enchantments and when they cease, I know I will be left in something close to despair because that is the condition that most frequently follows, in my experience at least, its opposite. That neither state can last indefinitely is, of course, axiomatic and, I suppose, something to be grateful for. But still, who wouldn't rather

spend his time in the grips of that which makes him ecstatic than that which makes him long for the grave? And who wouldn't alter the contracts or forge the necessary documents to see this happen, so long as such alteration couldn't be traced back to him too quickly or easily – something that would undoubtedly lead to retribution and recrimination and all the other unpleasant effects invariably unleashed on those who refuse to abide by the guidelines we all seem to have agreed upon at some distant juncture? Of course, none of us can remember exactly where or when or why, though we have our suspicions. These involve flickering torchlight and the sound of people screaming in pain and we prefer to put those suspicions out of our minds whenever they make their appearance. We treat them as if they were once related to us but have since found disfavor for something they said or did. But secretly, inside, we know they are the types of things earlier peoples used to create their epic, oral poetry, to document their doubts and their horror and their outrage for later generations and to simultaneously rob such things of their power to cause harm in what might otherwise seem an interminable present.



A dozen steps lead to a lower level where the tropical vegetation has overtaken and concealed much of the concrete and the glass tile work, hides it from view and simultaneously allows the local amphibians to thrive without drying up, desiccation being that state they fear most – given the ready permeability of their membranes – if amphibians can accurately be said to fear anything at all. Which is not to suggest they are a particularly brave class of creature so much as to question the complexity of what goes on inside their heads. I consider lying beneath a particularly impressive overarching of banana leaves all day, or until the sun has drifted so far west as to seem as if it doesn't belong to our world any longer. As if it were its own entity and obeyed its own agenda without being the least bit concerned with what we might need or want from it, those of us occupying a sphere ninety-six million miles away (if you are to insist on a materialist reading of where we stand in relation to the other objects of the universe and what our influence over them might conceivably entail). Shouldn't the architecture of the sky follow some set and rigid pattern rather than simply changing every hour with the whims of whatever architect designed the sky in the first place and then decided he didn't like it, decided it might as well be left to its own devices? Or are we asking too much of the sky when we attempt to discern within it patterns and messages and other oblique ways of giving guidance to those of us here on solid ground where guidance is – to put it mildly -- so difficult to come by? It usually takes the form of words spoken by relatives determined to make us feel as if we have been behaving in a decidedly selfish fashion, or those written down by authors who don't really care if we pay attention to what they are saying. They are too busy wondering where their next swallow of good

scotch is going to come from and how they are going to take the events that actually happened to them at some point in the distant past – be they traumatic and involving the sudden appearance of serpents or blissful and necessitating the tangling of limbs and the quickening of breath one otherwise associates with staying on a treadmill too long – and alter them so as to make them unrecognizable to those who might have participated in the original events. If these altered events manage somehow, for all that, to become potentially transformative, to become that which finally makes the unbearable lives of those who consume them bearable if only for an hour or two (those who have plunked down their fourteen dollars and ninety-five cents), so much the better. But of course it is a balancing act with no hope of success, the sort of thing the high-wire artist experiences just as the wind is picking up and he is preparing to plunge the thirty or so stories to his death. The sort of thing that makes us wonder if perhaps we ought to abandon our search for transcendence, for anything even remotely life-affirming, and decide finally to just get by -- the way rodents do when they are shredding bits of newspaper to line their nests or the way the invasive zebra mussels of the great lakes do when they attach themselves to solid surfaces beneath the waves and wait out whatever time they have been given without so much as moving an inch.



How frequently are we deluded when it comes to our hearts' capacity to endure emotional overload and cruelty? Or the value of the surrounding pastureland? I would have expected, given the carnage I wake up to, some premonition, some visual approximation of the violence that must have ensued during my intoxication. Some channeling of its actual horror into a poetic, transformative equivalent. The sort of thing that turns us into characters in a narrative rather than just blobs of grease and protoplasm bouncing from one place to another without any clear understanding of why. But there is nothing of the sort – just what seem like immeasurable expanses of cognitive prairieland populated by beasts with long shadows. Violin music piped in from somewhere in the clouds as if there were speakers there hung from dirigibles and a microphone and a single performer standing in the gondola with his bow working furiously and his mind occupied with the rigors of improvisation. Even so, the final product sounds as if it has been scored and re-scored again, laid out from beginning to end with the mathematical precision of an engineer's blueprints for a bridge to span the Orinoco. Perhaps we protect ourselves unconsciously from the horrors that surround us at every moment of every day, and so when something extra-vigorous occurs -- when we are immersed in blood and the untoward facts of the body to an extent heretofore unimagined and unimaginable -- we have some resources to fall back on. Procedures made instinctive because of repetition, because of our ability to get in a rut and stay there. After all, when viewed properly, the rut is a real lifesaver. It can lead the way reliably across an otherwise treacherous stretch of wilderness.



Endeavor to drop the accent as it will never sound authentic, even if it is. We judge words based on their sound and not their meaning because we know somewhere deep inside ourselves without anyone having to tell us, without anyone having to demonstrate this truth through intricate logical maneuvers, that words can never mean anything, or at least they can't mean anything in quite the same way that objects can. When you place them side by side on a flat surface. And then you step back and you wave your arm a certain way – in a sweeping motion over the objects. Or, if they are large, in their general direction. Those in the audience will begin to shift about uncomfortably in their seats. Minutes pass, more people get anxious and pretty soon someone is shouting in the back row, stringing together expletives as if they were bits of shell and he is in the process of making a necklace. Make no mistake – he and the others like him are in on it; they have been rehearsed, they have been carefully selected based on the color of their mustaches and the blank looks they get in their eyes whenever you ask them a question concerning the Adriatic Sea, or the hypotenuse of a triangle and why it is almost always more beautiful than the other sides. After the others have cleared out, I approach a table occupied by a single, snarky-looking little man and three women each at least twice his size. I try to make out what they are saying before I get there, but the conversation unravels at the speed of electricity and sounds – as a consequence of each of these people speaking at exactly the same time – as if it were created by a machine. One with a handle on the side and a mechanism hidden away in the interior, a mechanism that is set in motion by someone turning the handle. The mechanism, I imagine, forces gears of soft metal to rub against one another so that there is a great deal of

friction, but not an excess of heat. Hence, the hum. One gets the sense immediately that all of this apes the physical operations of human coitus while intentionally leaving out some of the more salient factors, such as what we like to call an “emotional connection” and an imagination wholly taken up sometimes with images of other people’s shoes. It doesn’t take long, though, to realize we have been misled, have been left to fend for ourselves on a terrace overlooking a series of other terraces, each of which is, as near as we can tell (and believe me – we look; we have no choice but to look) abandoned. Bare of all life, except for perhaps a housefly here and there. Even that we can’t be sure of because the distances involved are such that what one thinks one sees might turn out, in actual fact, to be an illusion -- a trick of depth and shadows, and the mind’s unconquerable desire to populate the world beyond its borders with other entities very much like itself – meaning, very frail things, abysmal things, just moments from flickering out.



The pathway diverges suddenly in several different directions, and then several more after that, and so on, until when you split up in an attempt to follow each of them in turn you find that there are never enough members of your party to complete the job. Attrition is the official term for this phenomenon but it is lacking in color and makes one think of the pencils they used to hand out in school. The dull yellow paint on the outside, no doubt heavy with lead, and the irresistible taste of them on your tongue. The slight give beneath your teeth. Wouldn't it be wonderful to find yourself in the old haunts again, shimmying up poles cold to the touch and with feathers tied to the tops of them like decoys? When I come to again, there is blood everywhere. The floor is slick with it and I slip in my instinctual attempts to get away, to place some distance between me and the offending liquid. There is a sound like screaming, only too shrill to qualify, more like an extended animal squawk -- so long as that animal is diminutive in stature and prone to flights of terror. I look around for a moment trying to figure out which direction it is coming from, confused by the fact that it seems to be coming from all directions at once, and it takes me another moment or two to realize what this means. The center of all phenomena is the place from which all phenomena seem to radiate and to which they all eventually return. If you were standing at precisely this point, I suspect you would experience a void. One composed of the incoming and the outgoing cancelling one another out. You would think perhaps you had stumbled into some other dimension and did not possess the perceptual or cognitive tools necessary to make any sense of it. In this, of course, as in most things, you would be mistaken. The sound, I realize,

escapes from my own throat and at the moment of realization it stops, as if it has merely been trying to call attention to itself. Once this has been accomplished, there is no more need of its presence. It is free to continue its activities elsewhere. I see Anda standing in the corner of the room, partially lit now by a torch on the wall. She is standing over what looks at first glance like a rumpled sack of some sort of grain or produce, the shape of it suggesting it has been dumped here unceremoniously and its contents have begun to spill out on the floor where they will certainly go to waste unless someone comes along shortly with a hose and a bucket and twenty minutes or more of spare time to see to a systematic clean up. A sanitation and cataloging. A transporting from one place to another -- and then probably another after that -- all of it accompanied, one would imagine, by a continual distracted muttering under the breath.



At some point, our wounds – both literal and figurative, though I suppose it is the latter we fear more -- begin to stitch themselves up when no one is looking. They threaten to usher in an era of relative sanity and hygiene unlike anything we have experienced before. They are sick and tired of waiting for us to look after them properly. To figure out where each part belongs in relation to the whole and why we need different designations for the part and the whole when they are very nearly identical entities if examined closely. They belong to each other the way we belong to the ashes from which we are said to have arisen and to which we are said to return by those who don't believe in anything other than a very strict interpretation of the phrases they read when they are home by themselves in bed with the lamp on and the wind howling outside like miners lost inside the mine, and a very strict interpretation of the phrases that have been recited out loud to them at important ceremonies throughout their lives. At the start of banquets, for instance, that might then last sometimes in excess of six hours. The actual length all depends on who has been seated next to whom and what they find they have in common to discuss. Much of what gets said at functions of this sort involves the body and how to manipulate it in such a way that it can be expected to give pleasure to others. I don't think the object is to inform, though, to make sure those in attendance walk away with knowledge or insights they did not possess previously. I think the purpose is to eliminate all discussion of purpose once and for all. To relegate the

concept to something like an empty box stored away in the corner of the cellar. The same corner where most of the other boxes are stored as well, and should you decide to open one of them because you are curious, because you have found that any enclosed cardboard space is apt to hide something of value, you would discover that it too has been used to store items and ideas no longer deemed necessary or relevant. Old baseball cards. Whisk brooms and ledgers in green covers with hand-printed numbers running down their pages like rain water down the tin sides of a shanty. Or the tattoos on the arms of the woman you loved once who you can't quite get out of your mind now even though it has been twenty years since you last spoke to her, since she last wrapped you in those arms immaculate and tendriled, with the eagles anchored to them and staring out at a world fortunate enough to know how to move, to have never forgotten what it's like to be in one place and then decide you want to be in another. And finding in the process that there is nothing capable of stopping you. No stubborn flesh. No borders made permanent through the spilling of ink and blood.



Finally my hands are free and I can stand. This in itself is a revelation, the sort of thing that corresponds to doors opening and doves (or at least starlings) flying around outside the windows. When I approach Anda, I don't know what I am expecting but afterwards I realize it probably looks and sounds a lot like a drum when you hit it with a mallet while placing the palm of your other hand directly over the drumhead itself and drawing it taut, producing a muffled effect. Everyone in the room still recognizes that an instrument of some sort is being played. They re-direct their gazes for a moment, but then focus again on whatever held their attention previously. Part of the problem is our tendency to willfully scar our own pasts after the fact, as if we can't stand the idea of our pasts existing without us, continuing on forever in exactly the same condition we left them in, which isn't always as pristine as perhaps we might believe. The results are the spiritual and mental equivalent of lesions. I subscribe to the belief -- held now only by those who inhabit the forests at the very edge of civilization and beyond, those who look at us when we approach as if we had materialized directly out of their ancient myths and they must dispatch us, they must send us back to those myths *post haste* before we wind up changing their everyday lives forever -- that our aimless existence is every bit as important and sustaining as is our purposeful one. That when the two of them come into contact, when they do battle, as it were, on the open plain, we ought to just turn our backs and walk away. We ought to find the nearest cafe and sit down with a book and a cup of coffee and pretend none of it concerns us in the least. Not the outcome. Not the birds hopping about spastically through the branches of the

trees or along the sidewalk where people have inevitably dropped crusts of bread and nickels. Not the people in the chairs close by actively questioning our use of basic level categories like “bird” and “tree” and “chair” when we could just as easily delve deeper into the subordinate categories of the specialist and the expert. We could make what we have to say so much more challenging then, so that those listening to us might walk away with the sense that they have been interacting with a human being, in the fullest sense of that word, and not simply that which registers what is available to it at the most fundamental of levels, like a camera or a piece of paper on which a child has yet to sketch her initial outlines, her half-faces and primitive approximations of the things that occupy the room with her -- whether visible or otherwise -- with a marker or a paintbrush provided specifically for the task, or, for that matter, a cast-off nub of pencil.



The bodily movements in question resemble those of the flâneur inasmuch as they do not seem to have any ultimate goal, any purpose identifiable to those who are on the sidelines and know their insights rival those of the scholars who place their findings in journals with names we find it difficult to pronounce. Names originating almost always in the Greek and therefore striking our ears with all the subtlety of a claw hammer. I recoil from violence when it arrives as itself, as something so obviously designed to cause bodily harm to others that one can't reasonably argue otherwise. But when there is some room for interpretation, for deciding that what one experiences – what one sees and what one hears -- is not necessarily the same thing as what is actually out there, my mind increases the speed of its operations two or threefold and the ideas that result begin to accumulate at the base of some enormous structure that has also appeared as if out of thin air. It towers above everything else around it and you might crane your neck in an effort to catch a glimpse of the top where it recedes beyond what look suspiciously like clouds, but it is impossible to see the top given that the structure has no top and no bottom. It is all middle much like a story someone is already telling when you walk into the room and which continues long after you have lost interest in it and decide to leave. I become acutely aware for some reason that my hat is the same color as the structure and I begin to wonder, as is only natural, if maybe they are made of the same material. But my curiosity has never been overly assertive. It is just the sort of thing, like an aged canine, that raises its head at the advent of a loud noise but lowers it again almost immediately, the realization that a noise by itself is rarely

harmful overtaking it and allowing room then for more mundane considerations to make their appearance. Like whatever happened to those vivid dreams that used to haunt my sleep at night? Why aren't there human beings fumbling about in the dining room any longer? In the other room people have decided to do without their shoes. They have piled them up in the corners. Some of them have chucked their shoes out the windows, afraid, I suppose, that the others in the room will be able to discern the most compromising details about their lives just by gazing at what they put on their feet. I would follow suit, but I know I'd just have to explain myself later; I'd have to come up with a more compelling reason for my decision because no one believes me when I am telling the truth. The truth tends to tumble from my mouth in discreet pieces. Broken. Shattered at the edges. If you were to run your fingers over it at these edges (and not the middle which is dull and cold to the touch) you could expect to draw blood, to accidentally dislodge splinters and push them so deep into your flesh, they would never come out again.



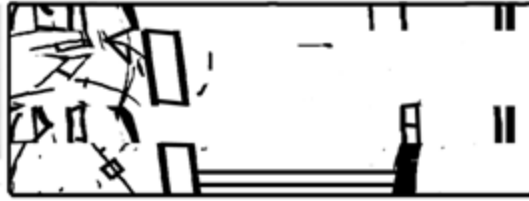
Power originates in depth, or winds up there. One or the other, I forget. The principle is one that causes great misery wherever it crops up, yet still we hanker after it like crepes. Should we overcome this desire, another one very similar to it in appearance shows up immediately and we don't so much start over again as pretend to have everything under control. Deep down inside, where the memes are hard at work like termites, where the brotherhood of rarely-intuited motives is forging bonds of the sort we normally associate with members of the high school track and field team, we know the best, the most rewarding parts of our existence have disintegrated more or less permanently. There will be no re-casting, no more solidifying around moisture. There will be nothing in the way of counter-clockwise motion. It is Beulah lying headless on the floor, the result Anda tells me, of my own intoxication, of the paste spread so liberally across my lips. We have been planning this for months, she says as she leads me back up the stairs. We just had to have someone of sufficient size and emotional instability to get the job done. Nothing personal. From the shadowy back passages below, the tormented screams of Beulah's idiot progeny rise up as the other former captives are having a go with implements I try hard not to imagine. Once you set yourself a goal involving the elimination of images, you are bound to fail. The mind has an agenda that is hard to fathom, but rest assured the primary item is one involving liberty even in the face of the inconsequential. Stubborn assertion of its own will before the will of he who claims to possess it. The same applies to the surface of the earth where you will find, should you go looking for them, organisms of every size and shape and

configuration arrayed against the soil itself in a battle which has been raging since the very earliest days of the planet, but which we have only just recently begun to recognize as something more complex and meaningful than just scenes for our common edification. Perhaps what occurs does so simply because the alternative is unthinkable. Space turned vacuum inside another vacuum. Nihilism without some bizarre bearded Russian around to comment on it and turn it into something of interest when we all know such terms hold no inherent interest in themselves. They don't even enlighten the situations they were coined to describe.



What is it about Vronsky that makes it so difficult to remain conscious? How am I to take the foreshadowing, the tick in my left eye that seems to grow in intensity until it is no longer a tick but a full-fledged shudder, an indication of pathology at such a deep level there is no hope, really, of ever being able to un-earth and eliminate it once and for all? The only option available at this point is complete surrender and then a lifetime of rehashing the events that led me to this place – a gate nine feet high, someone pacing back and forth behind the gate in the shadows cast by poplars and other indigenous species of tree. Who is that over there and why does he keep lighting pieces of paper on fire and then waving them about above his head? Could it be that what we call communication is really just a way to isolate ourselves even further through gestures designed to seem meaningful at first glance, while still managing to withhold any information that might otherwise let us know what is at stake and who is liable to be harmed in the process? Of course I don't mean physically, but I don't mean emotionally either. Think of the concept of the hybrid, the thing that is both itself and something else at the same time. Or at different times, alternating times. Like an amphibian which is both reptile and fish. Or at least has the potential to turn eventually into the one and revert back finally to the other. I like that the hum produced when this occurs is very like a soothing human voice. If you listen closely enough you will begin to hear barely discernible words. Whether these words actually exist or are inserted by the mind afterward because the mind can't help but to operate through some dim approximation of language, is anyone's guess, and there are as many schools of thought on the issue as there are individuals who are willing to create a school of thought. So that they might be taken

seriously, perhaps for the first time in their lives. So that they might have something to point to when they too are standing before an imposing gate and whoever is standing behind it, in the shadows, asks them why they are there and what they hope to achieve once they are granted access to the environs behind the gate. The limitless plains, the villages laid out as symmetrically as handsome human faces. The residents of these villages as happy and contented as if they had been allowed to reside forever in the most spectacularly fevered of all their tens of thousands of spectacularly fevered dreams.



Outside, the moon is low and animals are making a racket in the hedges. The sound of it, the sound of anything really, is soothing now and reminds me of a time when sound itself was enchanting, something to cause wonder and awe. It was the ingredient most likely to be missing and when it showed up eventually, everyone in the area spoke of its appearance in whispers. They agreed with one another for the first time in weeks, setting aside differences that had haunted them for generations. Usually these originated in what to outsiders might have seemed inconsequential quarrels and barely noticeable differences in physiology. Eyes set a millimeter too far apart. Lips with indentions in them. I suggest we take the river again, but of course the johnboat is long since washed away or destroyed and, as Anda says, civilized human beings can not rely upon the whims of the river. It will turn them into beasts by and by, assuming it hasn't already done so. I like the way she talks, the firm resolve she exhibits even in the face of hopeless situations or those situations with qualities one can't exactly quantify or describe – situations that don't really seem like situations at all because they come and go with almost no one else noticing. They adopt the timbre of old photographs, meaning they stand still for extended periods of time, and when they do decide to move – or to incorporate movement within themselves by sending their fundamental elements scurrying about from one place to another like arachnids – they almost always make it seem as if they haven't decided anything at all but have merely been acted upon by exterior forces. What these forces could possibly consist of no one is sure because whenever someone tries to write up the paper that would identify them, he

is poisoned mysteriously in his sleep or he loses his reason, sometimes precipitously, sometimes overnight. Anda beckons me to follow her into the woods and at first it seems as if she is making things up as she goes along, stumbling blindly through the thistle and the mulberry that is surprisingly thick. Maybe the concept of quantity is one that is just destined to remain forever alien to me, something the pursuit of which I should abandon so as not to make myself look any more ridiculous than I already do, especially to those who watch my progress on occasion from the tops of nearby cliffs. Who signal to me, try to communicate some message to me I have as yet to decipher, by flashing sunlight in my direction, by reflecting it off the lenses in their spectacles or pieces of broken bottle or whatever else they might have discovered along the way that is possessed of a highly polished surface.



Yes, it's worrisome when Eulalie professes a new fascination for the love suicide plays of Chikamatsu. Not because I think they'll give her any ideas but because I can't imagine Eulalie's interest piqued by anything so tangible as ordinary words strung out crosswise on a piece of paper. Nothing you can hold in your hands, nothing you can peel the outsides off of the way you are compelled almost to take the clothes off a doll. But we shouldn't put too great a burden on this observation as it is frail at the center like all observations, and therefore wont to buckle. And it is apt to make a noise when it does so that we will spend the next six months attempting to decipher, ignoring in the process those who would be willing to love us, even groom us in the old-fashioned way, despite our ungainly appearance. Our outsized ears. Our shuffling gait. Maybe Eulalie is trying to tell us something the only way she knows how – through extra sensory perception. And the language of the body which is a language everyone speaks in common even when we find we are no longer possessed of an actual body. We have relinquished it due to an unforeseen illness or an accident involving the railroad and our poor peripheral vision. This is the point at which, if we were adept at moving our puppets, we would have them move to the center of the arena and gaze intently into each other's enormous eyes. We would wait breathlessly for the trumpets to play in unison off-stage, the agreed upon signal to proceed with the final act: the raising of the blades, the shaking of those empty heads, a shaking designed to signify either grief or the overwhelming anxiety one would, of course, expect when facing the termination of one type of existence and the consequent beginning of another. Not that I put too much credence in those doctrines that say we are going to recognize immediately and cleave to

those who mean the most to us when we meet them on the other side. When you get right down to it, there probably aren't any sides. No angles, no walls. And even if there are, you can all but guarantee that these things exist precisely to separate us from one another, to ensure, for instance, that Eulalie will remain forever out of reach. Like a pomegranate in a locked cupboard. The kind of cupboard, say, with glass in the doors so that you can see what it is you are missing. You know you have merely to break the glass, to reach in and take the pomegranate, to make off with that which has tempted you so sorely. But you won't. You are afraid of cutting your fingers. You are afraid of accidentally ingesting the microscopic shards of glass that will, no doubt, have lodged themselves in the meantime in the fruit's otherwise flawless scarlet skin.



Each letter stands so close to the next, we see a blending where there is none, a conglomeration that turns sentences into mere smudges of black and renders the message incoherent. When you add speed to the equation, a passing at velocity in whatever bus or boat or taxicab carries us, you can forget about deciphering invitations, determining context or adjusting your long-held expectations. Anda promises civilization within an hour's march, but the humidity is high and I'm still feeling dizzy from the intoxication, so I have to sit down in what appears to be the remains of an ancient chicken coop, almost entirely taken over now by weeds. In the shade of the trees that tower above the structure, Anda caresses my shell and speaks to me of the far end of the universe where, she imagines, planets spin in endless, meaningless rotation and the stars extinguish themselves from sheer boredom. Her hands feel like the antidote to all poison and my mind is suddenly filled with images that have nothing to do with the world or anyone in it. They revolve upon themselves so that their underbellies become obscenely prominent and then there is a sound in the center of them like trumpets. It's almost impossible to reach the stage one stage beyond where you currently find yourself, but struggle is expected and when the wind bangs at the window like a fist, you can be excused for taking this as a sign. Maybe we are built to love only ourselves and when we escape these original settings, when we find room inside for more than one, we are not so much transcending that original condition as re-stating it, turning it into its opposite by saying it out loud. You know, says Anda, her fingertips mapping seams absently, you are not really an egg. You have just convinced yourself of this at some point in the

past for reasons that you probably don't even remember, reasons that have ossified by now and sit somewhere far away, on the ground, like stones. If you were to stumble upon them again all these years later and pick them up and crack them open, you'd find inside an empty, black core. A core of nothing. By way of illustration, Anda pulls at the organ that has begun, thanks to her exertions, to crack its way through brittle shell for the first time in my memory -- something tangled and intricate and long, engorged now and throbbing, insistent against her skin. I fear for a moment she has let some sort of contaminant in, that the compromise is one-sided and I will suffer terribly and die a protracted death, but she seems to know what she's doing, and besides! when one discovers something new, something animated and bizarre and pointy, one has to stick around long enough to give it a name. To determine what it is capable of unleashing upon the unsuspecting public.



The pit at the center of the cherry stands no chance against my teeth, not on this day when the sounds that drift down from the floor above are those of fallen bottles and someone playing a familiar melody on what I take to be a mandolin. I'm left with innumerable hard bits on my tongue, intermixed with the half-chewed pulp, and an unpleasant sense that the melody is going to haunt me until late in the evening when I can finally put a name to it. When I can tell myself that what I am doing is no different than what everyone else on the planet is doing at some point or another. Barking commands at imaginary underlings. Exploring roads that seem to have no set direction -- no single identity of their own -- just so as to have something to do for half an hour. Or until the clock stops working because it is one of those with hands and the force of gravity has finally grown stronger than whatever force it was that allowed those hands to defy gravity for years on end. Of course, just when I think I have turned a corner, when I think I will be able to continue without suffering one abominable pang after another for the rest of my life, I look into her eyes again for just a moment and I am lost. How can the most intense experience one knows in a lifetime be the simple act of gazing? Thank God at times like this for the invention of the trombone! For those who know how to make the trombone sound faintly like a full-fledged thought first emerging from that region of the mind where thoughts have not yet been granted their full compliment and arsenal. Where they are mere lines and shadows floating about at the surface of something very like a soup or stew. And you are expected to dip some sort of implement (this, in the right hand, I suppose, is the trombone itself, though it could also conceivably be other items like a spatula or a novel, so long as you are the one who writes it) into

the soup or stew so as to dredge up from the bottom whichever pieces have gotten stuck, have been burnt on and so can be expected to contain the greatest concentration of minerals and collagens and whatever peculiar shapes give our thoughts their solidity, their ability to hang together even when we hurl them at objects in the outside world that we might otherwise expect to dash them to pieces. Soon it becomes obvious that it will never be enough for us to exist inside our own skin. We are expected to occupy other selves as thoroughly as we occupy our own. And yes, we are supposed to ask permission first, but that doesn't ensure a painless transition. Quite the contrary! There is blood in there and we will, by definition and the laws of physics, displace it. We will take up space previously reserved for nerve fibers and whatever serves as the interior equivalent of a mirror.



Affix support braces to the walls and still there is a rumbling sound, a vibration that seems to emanate directly from them, from inside rather than where you would expect it to, namely the ridges and fault lines that run for some distance along the horizon. We can't always see the horizon but we know it is there because people refer to it constantly. It seems to be one of those things in the world without which we could not orient ourselves. We could not stand up straight for any length of time. In this we are very similar to the bean plants and other vegetation the elderly never tire of planting around their otherwise run down houses. Not that we need the comparison to make sense, to be coherent the way ordinary speech is coherent until you introduce narcotics or lesions on the brain. But still, we have certain verbal expectations and when these are violated, we feel as if we have steered, quite by accident, into a world nearly identical to our own, but with certain key differences as well. Long straight patches where nothing happens. The conspicuous absence of birds. Anda straddles me, takes the crooked emanation into herself as easily as if she had been created specifically for this moment. The sensation is not at all what I had come to expect given the descriptions of it one finds in periodicals or the loose talk of acquaintances when they don't realize their every word is being memorized by someone with a vested interest in what is being said. It is a category of bliss, to be sure, one at the very top of that ladder, but the operations of the mind do not cease and the operations of the body follow a logic all too familiar to anyone who has studied the positivists. Anda makes noises I try for a while to emulate, but there seems to be no reason for this and she

shoots me a quizzical look out of the corner of her eye at one point which makes me feel self-conscious. So I begin instead to speak out loud the filthiest things that come to mind. That they come to mind at this moment with almost no prodding strikes me as something just shy of a miracle, the sort of thing that occurs, apparently, at regular intervals the further back you go in time. But which has now all but dried up (if one can, in fact, rely on a comparison using the organic concept of moisture or the lack thereof to capture the entirely inorganic concept of the miraculous). With the possible exception, now and then, of burn patterns on ordinary pieces of bread. Or someone snapping a bungee cord above a river and living to tell the tale. Even if she breaks a collarbone in the process. Even if she emerges covered in contusions. But make no mistake. There is no apparent structure to these contusions at all. They seem entirely random in their distribution, as if to call into question the concept of the guiding hand at precisely the same time the outcome of the event itself seems to verify it, seems indeed to insist on it in quite the haunting vox alto.



Panic sets in right before resignation and the two begin an intricate dance that puts anything else you have seen (on the island of Bali, for instance) to shame. Later, the same groups of people who first set eyes on one another at the airport are asked a series of questions, the object of which is to suggest they have been trusting their eyes far too much and ought, at some point soon, to switch allegiance to one of the other senses. Of course no one is going to admit this up front, and, when confronted, the authors of the experiment refuse to act as if they can even write. They stumble about with their hands swinging aimlessly at their sides like broken scaffolding, and as the setting sun gets in their eyes they begin a wailing and a caterwauling more appropriately associated with common apes. There is no point in judging, though, unless judgment will make us feel better about ourselves. This occurs frequently enough, I suppose, to encourage some people to comment on it and others to act as if they have been aware of it since they were very small children. They were in the habit of observing everything that went on around them. The lighting of the oil lamps come sunset. The whispers growing to a crescendo over time. You can determine for yourself whether or not these whispers had anything to do with talcum powder, but, for my part, my mind is made up. It's made up before I ever even step into a room and see all those who might be arrayed against me. Each sitting bare-chested at a desk with an open bottle of ink on it and a handful of old-fashioned goose quills yet to be sharpened. Imagine my horror when I realize what is going to take place. How I have been tricked into showing up through promises of wealth. Ingots stacked up in crates. Pieces of paper with my name on them and the insignia of what I can only imagine were, at one time, venerable financial

institutions or government agencies long since passed now into the mists of non-existence. Someone at my elbow (there always seems to be someone at my elbow these days, as if I have grown so notorious complete strangers can make a living now just by promising to keep a close eye on me around the clock, from morning until night when really they ought to be in their beds sleeping and dreaming about what it's like to make love to someone you have only ever seen at a distance) says something I can't quite make out, but I know it is intended to warn me of the approach of danger on my other side, on the side where my other elbow is located and, at least for the moment, unencumbered by someone's being "at" it. I just have time to duck my head when something weighty, and no doubt very sharp, passes over it, something that makes a terrific hissing sound as it does so, its bulk and momentum sufficient, I suppose, to separate the oxygen molecules in the air from their companions and therefore threaten to make everything around me blow up. At least that's how I imagine things happening at precisely the same time as they are happening. Perhaps then I have merely to imagine my way out of this predicament as effortlessly as I have imagined my way into it. I have merely to furrow my brow and suddenly, just like that, everything will be back to the way it was last Tuesday.



Under the earth something stirs, follows its own inclinations to the surface where, I suppose, it finds enormous disappointment and so returns to where it came from. In the meantime, we look around, trying to find what has changed, what this visitation has done to alter our environment. Whatever we see we file away as just so much clutter. We pretend the desk is the desk where we paid our bills the day before. We strain to maintain some sort of consistency in the way we sign our names. Maybe, though, those lines in the soil were made by a tractor. And whoever was driving it had something particular in mind, some message he wished to send to the rest of us but he didn't feel ordinary language was up to the task. He thought he'd sensed in it a separation from the everyday such as you find in the minds of schizophrenics and those who must care for them. Those who are infected with their wards' particular way of discerning the universe and, once infected, abandon all desire for a cure. Afterward, Anda brushes the leaves from her body and gets dressed and I am left to figure out how to fold back up and conceal this new appendage, this sudden emblem of what I was not previously that still hangs obscenely from the broken portions of my shell, that has pushed its way through and shows no inclination, now that it has been utilized for its obvious purpose, of retreating. We discover important truths on the fly, divine them, as it were, through the simple prosaic refutation of the divine that manual labor represents. A working things over with the hands. A turning the mind into little more than an extension of that which houses it. That which is charged with getting us safely from one place to another, all the while engaging in whatever mischief it can get away with. Breaking off bits of wild

sugarcane. Bringing them to the tongue. Anda can't contain her mirth as she watches me fold it and bend it and attempt to conceal, and I would like to be angry, but the endorphins are still running amok -- flooding the plain -- and the sun is sinking somewhere behind us. Animals are moving about now in the underbrush not far from what is left of the coop and it is time for us to move on. Once under way, Anda utters the name of the city that awaits us at the end of the path, utters it with some intensity as if to make of it a talisman. I ask her to repeat the name several times, pretending not to be familiar with it, but I just like the sound of her voice, the sound of something tangible residing on her voice like a wooden box of the sort that usually contains something of value. A bracelet or a small ceramic pipe. An ardent, hand-written note from someone no one else in the family knows.

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